

FEATURE - VIGNETTE

## The Spirit of Englishwoman Mary Carpenter's *Our Convicts*

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In 1864 Mary Carpenter wrote a classic volume on prison reform and prison education, *Our Convicts* (see the 1969 reprint by Patterson Smith). The central sentiment of Carpenter's book is that they are indeed our convicts; we have to either live with them in our neighborhoods or establish programs capable of improving their lives to improve communities. All this seemed to suddenly dawn on the English after their policy of exiling felons utterly failed. Only "one British colony [in Australia] will now admit on its soil our criminal outcasts. Until lately, we shipped them without remorse or subsequent inquiry. The harsh Colonial Governor, to whose custody they were consigned, kept them in order by the manacle and the triangle [on which convicts were flogged], the armed sentry and the...bloodhound..." (Carpenter, in Hill, [1975/1857], *Suggestions for the Repression of Crime*. Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, p. 505). In the midst of this mid 19th century crisis, Carpenter asked, repeatedly, in the same book, "What are we to do with our criminals?" (p. 464), or alternatively, "We do not know what to do

with our convicts, and therefore we are releasing them prematurely from gaol [jail]" (p. 507)...[again]"On every side the question is asked what is to be done with our criminals?" (p. 508)...yet again, "Our most distressing problem—"What shall we do with our criminals?"" (p. 617); "[and even another time]...the alarming question—What to do with our felons?" (p. 638). Prison educators might take a "heads up" from this episode. The crisis led to a brief period of prison reform, followed by a return to the previous, harsh conditions. They returned when the English determined that they could confine prisoners in old ships chained to the docks, instead of being transported to Australia. Eventually the publics in nations where similarly harsh conditions exist now will realize the failure of the "out of sight, out of mind" policy toward criminals. Then communities in those nations will have no choice except to face the issue of "What to do with our convicts" head on, just as the English had to face it back then. The repeated failures of many institutional systems cannot be ignored forever.

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