

Convicts: A Global History

Clare Anderson

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)

[ISBN: 9781108814942]

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When seen through the lens of the twenty-first century, the history of punishment can be described as a chronicle of confinement and incarceration. The adjectives that immediately come to mind are related to immobility, enclosed spaces, and inertia. However, this has not always been the case. Since the early modern age, governments have transported convicts across seas and lands to meet the states' needs in terms of labour demands, managing troublesome individuals, and as a means of colonising 'uninhabited' lands or new frontiers.

In *Convicts: A Global History*, Clare Anderson aims to unfold a comprehensive account of convicts' transportation, drawing on her twenty-five years of research in the field. In the book, she underscores the similarities which had characterised convicts' transportation in both European and non-European empires between the fifteenth and the early twentieth century. While in her previous research, Anderson focused exclusively on the British empire, in *Convicts* she attempts to explore the movement of convicts on a global scale, drawing upon her research in French, as well as Spanish and British archives. She further draws on secondary literature, expanding the geographical analysis to include the Chinese, Japanese, and Russian empires.

In the book, the scholar consistently employs the terms 'circulation,' 'connections,' 'multi-directional,' and 'multi-staged' as recurring motifs to describe the complex and dynamic patterns of movement among convicts. In fact, her first and central argument challenges the conventional view of the history of punishment, which, influenced by Michel Foucault's ideas, has emphasised the static nature of punishment through the development of prisons and penitentiaries in the nineteenth century and the end of pre-modern forms of punishment. On the contrary, Anderson contends that punitive mobility coexisted with incarceration, and she underscores that during the nineteenth century 'transportation, deportation and exile were more globally expansive than at any point in world history' (16–17), making it a significant aspect of her argument.

The second key argument throughout the book is that convict transportation not only preceded and coexisted with other forms of exploitative mobility, such as enslavement and indenture, but also persisted and intersected with them. In places like

Mauritius and in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Caribbean, convicts worked alongside slaves and indentured labourers. In some cases, the shortage of free or enslaved workers instigated convict transportation. The British administration itself acknowledged the proximity and interchangeability of these forms of exploitative labor, as judiciously articulated by the Colonial Secretary, Frederick John Robinson, 1st Viscount Goderich (1782–1859). He underscored that, in such circumstances, convict transportation more closely resembled a slave trade, wherein convicts were treated as ‘articles of merchandize’ rather than as criminals undergoing legal sentences (142–43).

According to Anderson, the enduring practice of ‘punitive pluralism’ (139) in the nineteenth century stemmed from a convergence of factors common among states and empires. First and foremost, there was a prevailing consensus that convicts were deemed ‘too valuable’ to be executed or locked into jails. Their uncertain legal status and inherent flexibility were regarded as pivotal factors that positioned convicts as an excellent source of cheap labour. As a result, convicts were transported over vast distances to inhospitable and undesirable locations, fulfilling governmental demands and serving colonial objectives (chapter 3). In the book, examples of these practices include convicts’ employment in the sugar estates in the Caribbean, the deportation of undesirable convicts to the Australian colonies, and the imperial ambition to colonise new frontiers, such as Hokkaido Island in the Japanese empire.

Additionally, governments saw convict transportation as an effective means of inflicting severe punishment and acting as a deterrent against crime. In the Andaman Islands, for instance, officials believed that Hindu prisoners endured hardship during their transportation to the islands due to their religious beliefs, which prohibited Hindus from crossing the *kala pani* under the risk of losing their caste affiliation.¹ Consequently, the British Indian Government viewed the prospect of transporting prisoners to the Andamans as an effective deterrent against crime (chapter 6). Nevertheless, the daunting challenge faced by punitive mobility was to simultaneously impose severe punishments, deter crime, fulfil labour requirements, and establish new colonies. Since meeting all these requirements proved unattainable, critics of punitive mobility frequently underscored the absence of severe punitive measures, especially expressing concerns regarding the effectiveness of penal colonies (chapter 5).

To grasp this intricate framework of punitive mobility, Clare Anderson employs a networked approach commonly known among scholars as ‘carceral circuitry’ (11). In *Convicts* she does not adhere to a geographical or chronological division; instead, she focuses on various major themes, basing her analysis on the interconnectedness of punitive practices and the circulation of knowledge among actors: states as well as prisoners. As a consequence, the book is divided into two distinct parts: in its initial

¹ The term *kala pani*, which translates to ‘black water’ in Hindi, signifies the prohibition of crossing vast seas in Hinduism. The immediate consequence of such an act was the loss of caste, which made this taboo especially significant for members of higher castes who risked losing their social status.

section (chapters 2–6), the book delves into the ‘when,’ ‘why,’ and ‘how’ empires and states transported convicts overseas. In the second section (chapters 7–11), Anderson shifts her focus to the role of convicts in shaping medical and ethnological knowledge and on the circulation of punitive practices among states and resistance strategies among convicts.

After addressing the ‘when’ and ‘why’ in detail in chapter 2 and providing a comprehensive list of penal colonies where convicts were transported from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, Anderson’s subsequent chapters (3–6) delve into the intricacies of convict relocation. This section revolves around two fundamental concepts: that of ‘multi-staged’ and ‘multi-directional.’ In the nineteenth century, convict transportation became a multi-directional process. It was not merely a centre-periphery movement; rather, convicts were transported from territories within the empires, and sometimes even between different empires, as exemplified by the case of the French, Spanish, Dutch, and British Caribbean islands. Furthermore, as explored in chapter 5, convict transportation consisted of multiple stages; it involved transitions between various statuses, including confinement in solitary cells and labour-intensive assignments, ultimately leading to semi-free conditions. These stages were designed with the goal of rehabilitating inmates and facilitating their reintegration into civil society upon the completion of their detention period. The effectiveness of the stages system had come under scrutiny as early as 1840 by the Molesworth Committee. Furthermore, the author herself, in her concluding remarks, expresses a critical perspective. Anderson is particularly sceptical about the feasibility of punitive mobility effectively administering both severe punishment and meeting labour demands while *simultaneously* rehabilitating the prisoners (395).

The second section (chapters 7–11) of the book has been structured by the author around two further notions: those of ‘circulation’ and ‘connection.’ As a matter of fact, the circulation of convicts within the empires and between empires meant the circulation of ideas, knowledge, and practices, including those related to prisoner management. The latter issue takes centre stage in chapter 7, where the author delves into the circulation and exchange of practices concerning punitive mobility. Some strategies of penal punishment, such as Walter Crofton’s system of progressive classification of prisoners in Ireland, spread to other penal colonies and states. In 1872, the establishment of the International Penitentiary Congress elevated the discourse on topics such as corporal punishment, convict treatment, and the conditions of women to an international level.

Of particular interest are the issues outlined in chapters 8, 9, and 10. In each of these cases, Anderson examines the transmission of knowledge and the role and individual agency of prisoners in facilitating its acquisition. In the realm of sciences, natural and botanical expeditions consistently included stops at penal colonies, where inmates were made available to scholars for flora and fauna classification or inland excursions (chapter 8). Similarly, inmates served as a convenient conduit for

experimentation in the fields of medicine, sociology, and statistics, as they constituted a readily controlled group for large-scale experiments.

Despite the remarkable effort to integrate the practice of transporting prisoners among various empires, thereby creating a comprehensive portrayal of punitive mobility, the author's background naturally influences the book. This results in a more detailed examination of occurrences related to the transportation of prisoners within the British Empire, with a notable focus on the Andaman Islands and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, *Convict: A Global History* accomplishes its objective by situating the history and exploitation of convict labour within the broader context of forced migration and colonisation. Clare Anderson successfully reevaluates the history of punishment, challenging Foucault's narrative and providing a new perspective on prisoner transportation during the nineteenth century. The book represents a significant contribution to the study of punitive mobility and its role in the global historical perspective of labour and colonialism.