

12. According to figures obtained from the Registrar-General, the ascertained population of the colony at the close of the year 1882 was 307,671 males and 254,133 females, total 561,804 persons; and the number of prisoners at the same date was 527 males and 103 females, total 630. At the end of the year 1883 the population was 319,033 males and 265,941 females, total 584,974 persons; and the number of prisoners at that date was 505 males and 101 females, total 606. The average number of prisoners to population was therefore as follows: In 1882, .171 per cent.; in 1883, .103 per cent.

13. In the year 1882, 113 male and 3 female debtors were detained in gaols, against 111 males and no females in the past year; and in 1882 there were 48 male and 4 female lunatics transferred to asylums from gaols, as against 56 males and 13 females in 1883. Again, the prisoners acquitted after remand are shown as 410 males and 62 females in 1882, as against 414 males and 64 females last year, giving for 1883 a decrease of 2 male and 3 female debtors, an increase of 8 male and 9 female lunatics, and an increase of 4 male and 2 female prisoners released on acquittal after remand.

14. As regards the number of prisoners sentenced to penal servitude in the prisons during the year, Table H shows there were on the last day of 1883 201, as against 219 at the close of the previous year, or a net decrease of 18 prisoners, or about 9 per cent., in the more serious crimes for the year.

15. In a former report I drew attention to what I still consider the objectionable system of confining penal-servitude and hard-labour prisoners in the same institution. I believe this subject is one which is well worthy of the attention of the Legislature, with a view of deciding whether or not this practice shall continue. The universal opinion of those who have studied this important question is that penal-servitude prisoners should be located in separate prisons, and their treatment made of a more rigorous description than that of merely hard-labour ones: this is the rule and practice in Great Britain, and, indeed, in the penal establishments of all well-regulated States.

16. The progressive-stage system of classification, now in force in all the prisons of the colony, works well as far as it goes; but, owing to the unsuitability of most of the buildings for carrying it out, it may well be termed only an initial step, and does but little toward effecting that desirable end, the reformation of the criminals. In illustration of this progressive-stage system as now in operation, two examples may be taken. A, an old, hardened, and expert criminal, receives a sentence of five years' penal servitude for robbery with violence; and at the same session B, a man of superior stamp who has never before seen the inside of a prison, receives a similar sentence for, say, forgery. As long as both these criminals conduct themselves according to rules, they remain in the same stages of classification, and A, from his long experience of prison discipline, is unlikely to offend against the prison rules. These two individuals advance in class year by year together, and as time goes on are associated on the works, and in some prisons, where there is not accommodation for the requisite separation, in the same cells. The consequence is that A has every opportunity, which he is not likely to miss, of educating B in every description of crime of which his experience has made him master. As the result of this tutoring, B leaves the prison a much more degraded and worse man than when he entered it, and may probably soon again lapse into crime. Thus, an offender who may be only a criminal by a first offence, and might never relapse but for his prison association, is likely by that baneful experience to be transformed into an habitual offender. Now, if the reformation of the criminal class—and here I specially allude to the "first-offence class"—is worthy of consideration at all, I emphatically contend that prisoners undergoing penal servitude should be consigned to an establishment entirely separate from other prisoners, where they would be treated with strict justice tempered by consideration and humanity, under charge of officers fitted to be intrusted with such large powers as punitive discipline requires, and at the same time qualified on occasions to administer advice in a spirit of kindness, which is perfectly consonant with the exercise of strict prison discipline. The most economical and best penal institution that could be established would, I believe, be in some island such as Stewart or D'Urville, where stone, minerals, flax, clay for bricks, &c., can be found, and might be turned to good account by the convicts; and in addition there might be a farm connected with the prison, as at Borstal, Woking, Dartmoor, and many other long-established convict prisons in England, where men when due for release would, from the agricultural knowledge acquired in gaol, be made useful to themselves and to the community, and thus saved from falling into a career of crime. An establishment of this description should, if properly managed, be self-supporting, and at the same time afford the opportunity of separating first-convicted prisoners, except perhaps receivers of stolen goods and those guilty of unnatural crimes and indecency, from the other criminals, which is the great step in the direction of classification that should be aimed at by all prison administration. It is interesting to note that there have been 81 sentences of penal servitude passed in the colony during the year 1883, and 3 commuted death sentences, giving a total of 84 cases.

17. The past year has been marked by the operation in this department of the Prisons Amendment Act of last session of Parliament, which opens a new era in the system of discipline, and, so far, has worked admirably. By this Act it is provided that all aggravated prison offences shall, after being inquired into in the prison by a Visiting Justice, be reheard by a Resident Magistrate or two Justices of the Peace in open Court before any punishment can be inflicted. Yet, with a daily average of 636.8 prisoners during the past year, it has only been found necessary to bring forward the small number of six such cases for trial and decision by outside Magistrates. The amending Act has been in operation only since the 10th August last, but its influence has been salutary and valuable. Table M shows that, with a greater number of persons passing through the prisons, as compared with the previous year, the number of prison offences has been very materially reduced, more especially as regards those offences which are classed as "serious." The total number of prison punishments in 1882 was 295, while in 1883 they fell to 238, an actual reduction of 57. It will also be observed that, while in 1882 the serious offences were 81, they were in 1883 only 24. As a statistical commentary on the necessity for changes in Dunedin and Lyttelton Prisons, it may here be mentioned that, of the total number of prison offences in 1882, no