

MARCH 26, 1954

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## Behind Locked Doors

THE first of two articles on New Zealand's prison system is printed on pages 6-7. Our intention has been to discover and explain what is being done today with one of the hardest social problems. We began by wanting to know, and it seemed probable that other people would share our interest. There is of course nothing secret in prison policy: the facts are set down in departmental reports, and are available to the public. But only a few people go out of their way to seek them. Further, facts need to be studied in relation to other facts, and they do not come to life until we can see what they mean in the treatment of men and women.

When the facts are clear, and discussion can begin, it is still necessary to be wary of prejudice. Much of our thinking about prisons is clouded by feelings that are primitive and intense. The criminal at large is against society, and is therefore a potential enemy. Crime makes us feel insecure. Harshness is a common reaction to fear, so that people who in other ways are generous and humane may insist that the malefactor should be treated with unrelenting severity. Their attitude is coloured by what they feel about the worst offenders. They forget that there are degrees of culpability, that some men who go to prison are mentally retarded, have had little education, or are suffering for what has been done to them by other people. The varieties of human character are as numerous among prisoners as they are among respectable citizens. Yet the old idea persists that men are either good or bad, and that the wicked can be reformed by keeping them in a state of unrelieved misery.

To be deprived of liberty is in itself a severe punishment. Once in prison, however, a man does not cease to be a human being. He is

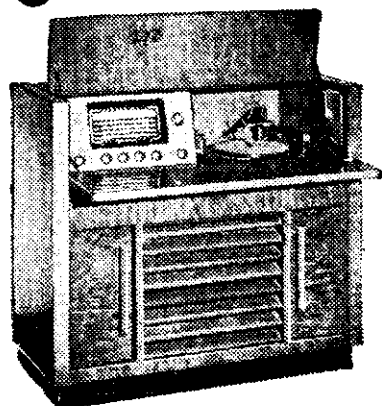
an individual with needs and aptitudes, weaknesses and virtues, and above all with a realisation that his life is changed, and may be ruined. In other days most offenders were given the same sort of treatment. Men who might have become decent citizens were driven deeper into bitterness, and became incorrigible. Nowadays prisoners are classified. In all prisons they are under firm discipline, and a glance at our photographs will show that they are not in places where humaneness could be mistaken for softness. The doors may not be locked as long as they used to be, but they are doors of cells, and the windows are barred. Within this setting, however, much can be done to encourage and reward good behaviour — and, increasingly, to take the twist from a damaged mind, or to open new possibilities of living.

Penal reform is inevitably slow. It is criticised at the same time by those who say we are doing too much and by those who say we are not doing enough. Yet there is a movement throughout the world towards new methods; and in New Zealand, where some pride is taken in social services, it would be strange indeed if our system remained unchanged. What is being done today is by no means revolutionary: it merely carries a stage further the attempt to turn bad citizens into good ones. This cannot be done by indiscriminating harshness, or by mildness rooted in sentimentality. It requires conditions which can allow prisoners to feel that society has not utterly rejected them. Ideas move slowly into practice, but penology is being influenced by broader conceptions of human behaviour. And although prisons cannot be turned into clinics, they can at least be places where the spark of human dignity that is in all men, even the lowest, may be kept alive and strengthened.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 26, 1954.

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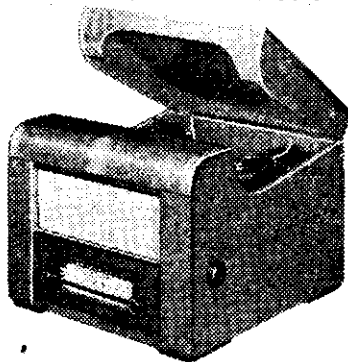


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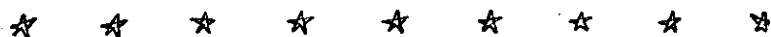
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