

Life at St. Helena.

THE island in Moreton Bay is referred to ; the place has an interest beyond that attachable to islands in general. It is the penal establishment proper of the colony of Queensland. Over 120 prisoners are at work there, growing sugar cane and making sugar, quarrying, building jetties and works for the purposes of a prison, growing grasses of various kinds, and sweet potatoes and other crops, and mutton for the use of the establishment. To all intents and purposes St. Helena is a model plantation or farm, carried on by prison labor ; a place where all have to do some sort of work—where men learn to be useful. There have been hard cases and desperate characters at the island—ruffians of which the records give full and particular account—bushrangers, burglars, prison breakers, horse thieves, and loafers of every grade. As time went on they were liberated, and it says much for the reforming process and the discipline carried out at St. Helena that the many notables confined there, and the great mass of those liberated, have turned to better courses when the opportunity was again afforded them. The re-convictions do not reach 5 per cent of the whole number of cases treated.

St. Helena can be reached by the Government steamer from Brisbane weekly. A pass from the sheriff, the visiting justice, T. H. B. Barton, Esq., or from the Colonial Secretary's office, ensures a passage. A landing is not allowed upon the island without this permit. The place is under strict military discipline ; the superintendent, John M'Donald, Esq., is a Crimean veteran, a Highlander, who won the war medals of her Majesty and the Sultan ; armed warders are continuously on the alert ; intruders (when they appear, and that is seldom) are ordered off in the unmistakably polite manner of military men.

Each steamer that goes down takes a detachment of prisoners, under police guard, in the forward part of the vessel. As a rule, clear weather prevails in Queensland, and, soon as the mouth of the River Brisbane is reached, on a clear day, St. Helena is seen, a literal gem of green in Moreton Bay. The island is not large. There are about 100 acres of arable land, of volcanic origin, and very fair quality. This is all under cultivation. In all, in little bits of flats, above high water level, around the lower portion of the island may be about 100 acres of grass land ; and there may be as much, or more, swamp and boggy flats, covered at high water, and of no particular value until levees and draining wheels are erected—all of which are in the future. There is sufficient good, high, dry land on St. Helena for the purposes to which it is put. Every yard is availed of, and that suffices for the present.

Shallow banks extend out from the island all around. Beyond the shallows are deep channels—flats and shallows are lively with sharks, the outside "guards" of the place it appears. In one of these channels, on the south-east side of the island, a buoy is fastened, and a barge, a rickety-looking concern, is anchored—it looks all ready to sink. From hence the landing is made.

Boats sent off from the island and the boats of the steamer take the passengers into shallow water, where they are met by spring-carts and drays, and taken ashore. A jetty is being built of conglomerate stone, found on the island, which will simplify the landing process. This jetty is a heavy work, owing to the great length it has to be carried out (some 1800 feet), ere deep water is reached.

With the exception of the armed warders who do sentry, and keep a look-out from platforms perched some 40 or 50 feet above the soil level, the place has nothing prison-like about it. Bodies of men are seen at work at the various occupations mentioned, but they do not seem to be dogged or watched as prisoners. From a distance—at which the address, "No. 00 St. Helena Gaol, No. 00," upon the back and legs of each man cannot be seen—they look like ordinary bodies of field and other laborers.

Going with the party of newly-arrived prisoners in charge of police from Brisbane, we reach "the stockade," after a march of about a quarter of a mile from the landing. The stockade is fenced with sawn hardwood, some 15 feet high, and after certain preliminaries are attended to, the party are admitted into a gravelled yard. Very nice, cool, and free from dust, this and all the other yards and walks about St. Helena look. They are made of marl and shells, a material plentiful enough, and which will add greatly to the coolness and comfort of Queensland homes when more generally in use around them.

All prisoners sent to St. Helena are first examined and catalogued in Brisbane Gaol. Their diplomas come with them. Each man is at once weighed and measured ; the color of his eyes, and any peculiarity about him, is duly noted ; he is made to scrub himself clean if necessary, and is furnished with a prison suit, every article of which bears the address and number assigned him. His own clothes and any property he may have are put in a bag having a similar number, and a record is made of all such. It is a fact that an average of 50 prisoners have not with them sufficient worldly wealth to pay for a passage to Sydney per A.S.N. Co.'s steamers.

The prisoners on St. Helena are divided into two classes, A and B. Each has a yard and surroundings quite apart from the other. The new arrivals are all put with the lower grade, and so remain for six months. If well-behaved during all that time, there is promotion to the higher grade, and tea, sugar, and tobacco are added to the supplies. The ordinary rations consist of bread, maize-meal porridge, and meat. There are several "scales" for the supply of the

articles named ; but all well-conducted prisoners have a sufficiency of the homely fare to satisfy hunger even in the healthy bracing atmosphere of St. Helena.

But discipline is upheld considerably through the agency of the stomach and the influences of single, solitary, and dark cells. On the evening of arrival of the detachment who went at that time, three young fellows thought they would improve the occasion by singing and shouting. The operation was neither loud nor inharmonious. But exercise of the kind is not permitted at St. Helena. The warder on duty

monious. But exercise of the kind is not permitted at St. Helena. The warder on duty ordered quietness, which, after a few seconds of braggadocio, was attended to. Next morning Nos. 00, and 00, and 00, were ordered into the outer yard. The superintendent arrives punctually as the bell rings, looking solemn and dignified.

"Stand forward No. 00," says the warder; and he reads from a large book: "At 9-31 last evening, prisoner —, No. 00, was singing in cell No. 00. When cautioned, he did not cease singing for two and a half minutes."

"What have you to say to the charge?" asks the superintendent.

"I didn't know it was any harm, yer honor," says No. 00, with a "downy" look that appears to tell the experienced questioner a good deal.

"Has this man any indulgences?" asks the superintendent. There were none. The cells for two days, with lowest diet that sustains life, were prescribed, with an expression that "You will know better next time."

"Yes, yer honor," says No. 00, who is marched off. The others were treated somewhat similarly. The cure is perfect in the cases of 99 men in 100. Absolute stillness and the stomach treatment appeal powerfully in the cause of good behavior.

The exceptional 100th was brought before the superintendent on that morning. He was a great big man who would be powerful were he not shambling in form; an old hand in gaol life, with a lurking eye that seemed to have a down upon all mankind.

"In the quarry, yesterday," said the warder in charge, "No. 00 was insolent; said he would rather be in the charge of any other warder than —; and acted in a manner injurious to discipline."

In answer to the usual question, prisoner said he was unwell, and made a rambling statement in justification. His ambition is to be a leader amongst his fellows, it would appear. He submits to the yoke for a time, and "indulgences" are granted him. Then he breaks loose, and, as in the case noted, the indulgences are stopped, and a single cell prescribed.

At 5.30 a.m. the first bell rings at St. Helena. The prisoners get up, wash, and tidy up their bedding. At 6, bell rings for breakfast; at 6.30, for muster. The roll is called, and squads are formed, each under the care of a warder, for the various works going on. Parties are detailed for duty in the bakery, washhouse, blacksmith shop, carpentry, &c. These latter are not under special surveillance.

At 11.50, bell rings for dinner, and labor is resumed at 1. 5 p.m. finishes the labor of the day. Supper is partaken; the prisoners are mustered in their different yards, roll called, and as called the men advance singly to the main gateway, where each is searched, and proceeds to the sleeping quarters. These consist of rooms, divided by partitions of hardwood, but open through strong gratings of hardwood on the face next the main corridor or passage of the prison; and cells, each for a man, who is completely shut off from his fellows. Lights are maintained all night in the corridors, and warders are on duty all the time, pacing their walks and rounds inside and outside the prison. The place is quiet—oppressively so when we know that over 120 men are lying within a space of a few hundred yards. The passages are laid with heavy matting. The warders wear slippers; their movements can be seen, not heard.

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warders wear slippers; their movements can be seen, not heard.

Until 9 p.m. the occupants of the grated cells can read and talk, but in very low tones. By listening we can hear the hum of human beings until 9 o'clock. After that all is silent. An occasional cough (and very little of that, saying much for the sea air), or a movement as the sleepers or restless ones turn in their hammocks, are the only sounds until the morning bell brings all hands face to face with the routine of another day. Such is the prisoner's life at St. Helena.

The warders are mostly married men; seven have their wives and families on the island. The others are quartered in large roomy barracks. The pay of these men ranges from £100 to £200 per annum, with rations. They are a quiet well-conducted body of men. The storekeeper, Mr. North, conducts a school, at which some 15 little ones attend. They were all very young, and well up in the rudiments of a plain education.

Sunday is a day of rest on the island; necessary work only is done. At 1 o'clock Church of England service is read by the storekeeper, and an effective pleasant reader he is. Clergymen seldom visit St. Helena—because there are no allowances, say one party; because we had often to submit to incivility when asking for passes, and inconvenience, say the other.

The practice is to hoist a signal flag on the Government steamer when there is a clergyman on board desirous of holding service. The men are mustered at once, and such as desire to attend do so. The others return to their work. Clergymen of all denominations have the same privileges.

The visiting justice comes down with every steamer, and the sheriff occasionally. Serious cases, and what may be considered the official business of the prison, are brought before these gentlemen. The superintendent attends to all other details.

The prisoners are allowed to communicate by letter with friends, at stated intervals, and letters are delivered to them; but all this correspondence has to come before the superintendent, that nothing subversive of discipline or good conduct may go out or come in. Visitors are also allowed to see the prisoners at stated periods. This latter is considered a great privilege. It is not often availed of, and then almost exclusively by the wives of prisoners. In the most humbling relations of life, woman, as ever, clingeth closer than a brother, or any other frienda whatever.

There is a "library" on St. Helena. Mr. Palmer, while in office, furnished most of the books, and some were contributed by other persons. With few exceptions, they are in a sorry plight. Years of use, in rough hands generally, have shaken them badly. The works are mostly of travels, and of the order instructive, with a few of the mildest kind of novels. There is quite a demand for this literature, and an extension of the collection seems amongst the things desirable for St. Helena. At various times men of considerable attainments have been inmates of the island. St. Helena was surveyed and mapped by one who had been an engineer officer on the staff of General Lee during the American war; and the offices of the justices, the superintendent, and others are decorated with maps, plans, and sketches of the island that bear testimony to the skill of the designers.

The prisoners are not allowed to see newspapers, and this, in the majority of cases, is said to be a most irksome privation. But news

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papers, and this, in the majority of cases, is said to be a most irksome privation. But news spreads somehow amongst these unfortunates. The late comers tell of what is going on in the outside world. They know that war is threatened; the older hands have an impression that St. Helena will be attacked (not an unlikely idea, seeing how effective the place could be made as a base of operations), and hints have been given that they would like to be prepared for a crack at the "Rooshans." Amongst the more intelligent men to whom "indulgences" are granted, a desire has arisen for information regarding the methods of carrying on war, military engineering, &c., and the excellent private library of the superintendent has been taxed in order to supply works that are not in the prison library, but which come within the range of literature allowed to prisoners.

Recently a large force of men was engaged making netting for kangaroo traps. This netting is made of strong rope. It is of sufficient height to prevent a kangaroo jumping over it, and the intention is to fasten the netting to trees and stakes in the form of yards, and then drive the kangaroos in the usual way. Some 1000 yards have been made, but the supply of rope has given out, and there is a stoppage in consequence. The intention is to have about three miles of netting, and to move it about and arrange it in places where effective kangaroo drives can be made. This netting is for a kangaroo association in the north. All the other work going on is for the prison establishment.

Although so many men have been confined on St. Helena during the twelve years the prison

has existed, and many of these men have been in a miserable plight on arrival, the mortality has been small. As some of the officers put it: Many who have been prisoners here would have been dead from riotous living had they not been pulled up. There are two children, the little ones of warders, buried on the island, and two women were buried there from immigrant ships before the prison was formed; there are also the graves of twelve men who had been prisoners upon the island. The graves are nicely kept; memorial stones have been placed over the immigrants (their names are lost, and there have been no enquiries regarding them); neat head stones and a fence surround the little ones. The graves of the prisoners are also fenced, and a neat slab of timber bears the name, age, and number of each of those beneath. The names are notably good—good English and Irish names. The information that the names given are not always those of the deceased, came with a jar. But they rest in peace there, on that beautiful grassy slope just above high-water mark, facing the east on St. Helena. There are several blacks buried on the island, and there is a belief that in the early days of immigration numbers were buried on the flats, and no token whatever left.

The garden of the superintendent is one of the finest in Queensland. It is not large, but the collection of useful and ornamental trees is rich and varied; and the place is kept in splendid order. The coconut and English oak, and scores of trees of less extreme qualities flourish there. Mr. McDonald and his good lady have a keen sense for plants of every kind that have usefulness or beauty to recommend them. The superintendent is a keen experimentalist as well. In various parts of the island cane of every kind that has reached the colony, grasses, and various

In various parts of the island cane of every kind that has reached the colony, grasses, and various economical plants, are put to the test by cultivation. So well are his qualifications in this line known that seeds and plants are sent to him for trial. Our columns have often borne testimony to the skill with which he can describe what has been and is going on. Guinea grass is the leading light at present. Some two months since Mr. McDonald explained in our columns how efficient this grass had been during the dry spell, and his willingness to distribute seed and plants to those who would give the grass a trial. We should not like to encounter the correspondence which followed. Letters in bundles have come from all quarters (not always with stamps for reply), and scores of packets of seed and roots have been distributed. The grass is not new to the colony. The Acclimatisation Society introduced it many years since. Mr. McDonald has effectually resuscitated it. Guinea grass is an enormous bearer. It grows from seeds and roots, but requires cultivation, and is well worth cultivating in the coast districts. Inland the climate is likely to prove too cold for it.

There is excellent fishing off St. Helena. Mullet, white fish, sea perch, and others are caught by net, and we had opportunity for seeing that the chief warder and his aids have not forgotten the wild north country sea fishing experience of their young days. Oysters also abound, but, owing to the nature of the discipline of the island, sport and diggings of the kind are not followed up to any extent. A new net is wanted very badly.

Altogether, St. Helena is instructive, very much so; and it is satisfactory as a prison. Persons of experience who visit the place say so. The system followed is reformatory and instructive rather than compulsory. Shot drill is the hardest physical punishment inflicted, and that generally by orders of the Judge who passes sentence. Men learn to labor and be useful there, and we have often, and in various parts of the country, met those seen in the first instance at St. Helena who are making the effort, and successfully, to respect the laws, and to labor in honesty for their living.—In this country it is a privilege that no man who has the will and health is too far gone to adopt.

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