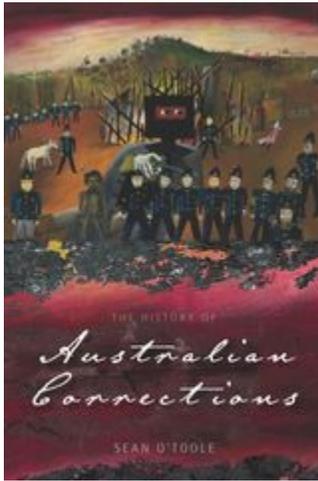


The History of Australian Corrections by Sean O'Toole. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006, pp. xx + 236, AUD \$39.95 Paperback, ISBN: 086840154.



In attempting to chart the development of Australia's various State and Territory correctional services from the convict period to the present day, Sean O'Toole has produced an engaging introductory text on the subject. There is much to admire within the book, which has been handsomely put together by UNSW Press. O'Toole reminds us of the constant exchange of penal ideas – architectural and administrative – between Australia, Britain and the United States over the past 200 years, while the selection of photographs greatly adds to the text, particularly in O'Toole's discussion of prison architecture. Although little new is uncovered in the chapter on the theories and experiments of Alexander Maconochie, it is refreshing to see the ideas of this often misinterpreted but important theorist and practitioner explored sympathetically, and the sections on the history of each State's judicial systems provide a coherent overview.

There is, however, a certain sense of disjointedness in the use of box-outs to provide more information on individuals. Eye-catching and informative as they are, these often serve as a distraction and might have been integrated into the main text: it seems a little like overkill to use a box-out on Maconochie's life within a chapter devoted to Maconochie. The book is also split into two parts and occasionally feels back-to-front: Part I deals with 'Key Issues and Themes', while Part II covers the 'Development of Corrections in Australian States and Territories'. It might have made more sense to cover the chronology first as the thematic approach adopted results in a degree of repetition, such as in discussion of the career of the Comptroller General of NSW Prisons from 1896-1909, Frederick Neitenstein, subject to a box-out in Part I (p.71) and then in more depth in Part II (pp.147-53).

O'Toole's book is firmly an administrative history, synthesised from the writings of those who ran the penal systems: those seeking the experiences of prisoners and guards, and the influence of public opinion should look elsewhere. Of course, in a general history some things are bound to be overlooked or covered in less depth than the reader or author might like. The field of community-based penalties is an interesting one, and while it is touched upon in a later section and in the discussion of convict assignment, more detail would have been useful. It would have been satisfying to find a more in-depth discussion of capital punishment, Indigenous punishment customs, and their treatment under the justice system. An exploration of the impact of the recent 'punitive turn' – rocketing prison populations, harsher prison conditions, increasing severity of penal language, mandatory sentencing, judicially-ordered public humiliation and so on – which appears to be returning us to penal practices abandoned in the past as uncivilised, would also have been welcome and instructive. There is also only a little sense of the transition from the convict period to the present day, except in the admirable section on prison architecture, and the sections on punishment in the ancient and mediaeval world appear out of place in this book.

As the Director of Learning and Development for the NSW Department of Community Services, and with experience of working with state and federal justice agencies, O'Toole brings considerable insight to his study. O'Toole himself recognises that succeeding scholars will need to examine the experiences of the imprisoned and the prisoner, the social mores influencing historical penal practices, and similar institutions such as children's care homes and asylums (p.xviii) to gain a wider appreciation of correctional practices. While this is certainly the case, O'Toole has nevertheless produced a fine outline history of Australian correctional services that will provide others with a solid base on which to build.

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