DULCIE DEAMER AND THE WOMEN’S REFORMATORY, LONG BAY

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Abstract

Through an analysis of an insightful article by Dulcie Deamer written in the mid-1920s, this paper, making use of Foucault’s theory of the prison, explores the changing public perceptions about the Women’s Reformatory at Long Bay near Sydney from the optimism of its official opening in 1909. The therapeutic ideological underpinnings of the regime at Long Bay, which were mainly devised by the feminist penal reformer Rose Scott, are scrutinised in some detail. The opportunities that were claimed to be provided in this new sanatorium of punishment and improvement are weighed up against Deamer’s vivid but pessimistic impressions in 1925 in "In a Women's Prison" which appeared in The Australian Women's Mirror.

When Dulcie Deamer, a prolific freelance journalist and well known figure in Sydney’s avant-garde and joie de vivre circles who had been living as the crowned "Queen of Bohemia" in King’s Cross, (Rutledge 256-257) visited the Women’s Reformatory at Long Bay in early 1925, the institution had been operating to public acclaim since its opening as a model women’s prison in August 1909. It had been set up on high-minded, approved and modern therapeutic lines - devised by Rose Scott and other penal reformers - which replaced the more punitive measures that had been used throughout the colonial period and through the first decade of the twentieth century. Typical of the propaganda served up to describe the effectiveness of the treatment in the new separate prison is this passage published on 7 November 1921 in the New South Wales Police News:

Indeed the Women's Penitentiary does not bear the aspect of a gaol, except when the bars and bolts and high external walls are concentrated upon. Women who are compelled to spend part of their lives in this place of punishment and improvement should never have cause to think they are on the same plane as those of old who entered the grim portal over which appeared the inscription: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here".

The Penitentiary for the reformation of women restores hope, and opportunity to hundreds of women and girls who repent of their descent into crime and determine to rise again to decent society and respect for themselves. ("In a Penitentiary" 28)

The poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" suggested itself to Dulcie Deamer's mind when she arrived at Long Bay in 1925, and on the basis of her impressions there she came to a vastly different, more sharply observant and sophisticated conclusion. At the prison’s gates she "involuntarily look[ed] up to see whether ‘All hope abandon, ye who enter here’ is graven overhead" whereas the unnamed Police News journalist saw the inscription over the gate in Dante’s "Inferno" as quite inappropriate.

Dulcie Deamer’s mission at Long Bay was to make observations and notes which would form the basis of an article that she intended to write for The Australian Woman’s Mirror as a piece of investigative journalism. Investigative journalism was not Dulcie Deamer’s forte; while experienced as a writer of articles, short stories and verse for women’s magazines, her main themes were exotic, purely imaginative, decorative or historical in nature, and her style was lavish and opulent. As a member of bohemian society she was by no means within the mainstream of Australian social realism or contemporary social commentary. Like the neo-
classicist artist Norman Lindsay who illustrated her first published stories in *The Lone Hand* on the Stone Age in 1907, she was more at home as a writer with the goddess figures of antiquity, legend and the primitive world than with the grim realities of the institutional life of an Australian prison for former women of the streets incarcerated for drunkardness, vagrancy, soliciting, stealing, or indecent language and assault. When she visited Long Bay, by her own admission, she did not in the least know what she was going to see. And yet her article "In a Women’s Prison" which became the tangible result of her observations, is remarkable in its keenly critical insight into and understanding of the effects of institutional life on those on the margins of existence.

Indirectly, however, Dulcie Deamer’s varied bohemian experiences in King’s Cross and her unorthodox social relationships may have prepared her well for what she was to witness at Long Bay in the summer of 1925. She was born in Christchurch, New Zealand on 13 December 1890 and began to write verse as a child. She was entirely educated at home by her mother who had been a governess. In 1906 at the age of seventeen she won a short story competition conducted by the Sydney-based *The Lone Hand*. Shortly afterwards she joined a touring theatrical company, married before she turned eighteen, and travelled to India, Burma and China playing small parts and seeking copy for the hugely successful *The Lone Hand*. Her first novel was released during a visit to America when she was twenty-two (Rutledge 256-257). Deamer, in her own words, summarised her free-wheeling life through the 1910s and 1920s:

Crossed the equator eight times, bore six children, had three novels published in London - one of which was hawked in America, where it was stigmatised as "blasphemous and immoral" - and fulfilled the dire prophecies of relatives by wearing a leopard-skin on various public occasions. Tried to live in London, but decided I would rather cut my throat, so have been freelancing in Sydney for the past eight years. (*Messalina* 79)

It is unlikely that Dulcie Deamer was wearing "the hide of a she leopard" (*Messalina* 13) like the Roman Empress Messalina whom she so admired when she entered the "little postern door" in the large double doors of iron within the "great, arched entrance" ("In a Women’s Prison" 18) of the Women’s Reformatory in early 1925, but there is no doubt she would have cut a formidable and dynamic figure to prison authorities there!

The architectural apparatus that Dulcie Deamer was to witness in her first set of observations beyond the metal postern door, which she had to stoop to pass through, was much the same as it had been on the official opening on 25 August 1909. The Women’s Reformatory was adjacent to the larger new State Penitentiary for males which had not been completed until late 1914. Both prisons were close to the rugged windy coastline and overlooked the sea to the east, Botany Bay to the south, a vast stretch of country to the Blue Mountains in the west and the city of Sydney to the north. The Women's Reformatory consisted of a central glassed circular conservatory set in a spacious quadrangle around which four large halls radiated as diverging wings, each containing seventy-two individual cells for the women inmates. As well, there were "two large ventilated workshops", a special lock hospital complete with a visiting surgeon for those incarcerated there under the 1908 Prisoners' Detention Act which required a complete cure from venereal disease before release, a large kitchen with modern appliances, a supply of steam for heating baths in the bathrooms and laundry and a specially constructed tramway line within the grounds that conveyed the female prisoners from the criminal courts in Darlinghurst, some miles away, into the institution through the main gates. By the time Deamer came on her tour of inspection, a chapel had been erected for the spiritual comfort of the inmates. She was able to visit and inspect all the buildings.

At the main entrance were found the "most complete baths and reception rooms" where provision was made for "cleansing" the women received from the courts, checking them for
infectious diseases and supplying them with clean clothing before they were passed into the Halls (where they remained according to strict classification) or, in the case of those suffering from infectious diseases, into the lock hospital until they were cured. Each inmate occupied a single room or cell at night and during non-working hours in which she was supplied with suitable literature and electric light (Return of Prisoners 177).

Dulcie Deamer’s first impressions are of the exterior public spaces and of the guardians of the inmates:

Wide paved spaces and beyond, ranges of bars dividing up the exercise yards that are like big, open-air cages. Great heavens! It’s reminiscent of a zoo! But these hefty, capable, pleasant faced women in crisp, blueprint dresses? They are the wardresses. They give a hospital touch to the picture; and now the head of the establishment - the matron - takes charge of us. Here is a woman in a thousand, a “tower of strength” if ever there was one. Her grey eyes briefly examine us, and one is moved to think, instantly, of Napoleon’s generals (don’t ask me why!). She is in white, like a nursing sister, and again the atmosphere of a hospital overrides that first ludicrous impression of a zoo. (18)

Deamer’s image of the zoo here is quickly replaced by that of the hospital, but it is, nevertheless, to re-occur in other parts of her article.

Deamer’s observations indicate that by 1925 the early twentieth century reforms of prison life for women, initiated by Rose Scott the social reformer, had been successful, but, as it turned out, only superficially so. It was in 1898 that Scott, with the permission of the newly appointed progressive Comptroller-General of Prisons, Captain Frederick Neitenstein, made her famous inspection of conditions for female prisoners in Darlinghurst and Biloela Gaols. The report that she wrote, which was never to be published officially, was both penetrating and devastatingly critical; in it her long-term goal was clear - the removal of women from existing gaols into a specially designed women’s prison "for the minority of whose crimes left no choice but some form of incarceration". For the majority she argued that imprisonment was inappropriate treatment, especially for prostitutes who were "victims rather than villains - casualties of vice and degradation" (Allen 153).

In her inspection of prison conditions for women in New South Wales Rose Scott identified a number of serious deficiencies that needed rectifying: female warders were inferior in quality to the male warders and they appeared to have little sympathy for their charges whom they considered to be "a hopeless set"; the work of female inmates "appeared to consist solely of scrubbing, cleaning, washing; and needlework of the most hideous and dreary description ... no variety, no brightness, no colour"; and the daily routine of female inmates seemed to Scott to be entirely "without interest, monotonous, colourless, depressing, without movement or life". The remorseless picture that Scott painted was almost entirely devoid of hope and rooted in a pessimistic Victorian view of the possibilities of the reform of the female lower classes.

Her remedies were forcefully presented. She argued that the key lay in building up the women’s self-respect and stimulating in them a 'love for work and a desire for good conduct'. To achieve this she advocated a five-pronged attack on the problem: the appointment of better quality warders who needed to be "like hospital nurses or teachers" and well trained; the establishment of a more cheerful environment - "fresh air, colour, sunshine, flowers, pot plants, music and books chosen by themselves shall all have a part"; the introduction of more varied, interesting work into prison life (including physical drill and gardening) to inculcate a love of it; the establishment of a system of indeterminate sentences combined with a progressive credit mark system (including better clothes as a sign of promotion); and some system of basic education including learning to read and to write, lectures on "cooking, household affairs, management and care of children, health, morality, ambulance and sanitary affairs" (Scott).

Most of Rose Scott’s recommendations appeared to have been implemented by the time

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of the establishment of the new Women's Reformatory at Long Bay in 1909. By 1920 the aging Rose Scott herself had considered this to be the case:

... Long Bay Prison is heaven compared to earth after Biloela [prison]: Mothers cannot be employed for a month after the Birth of an Infant - cleanliness, fire escapes, ventilation and provision for Sanitary conveniences are provided, also a reasonable proportion of space for each person employed .... (Scott Family Papers)

The published propaganda in favour of the success of the programme at the Women's Reformatory at Long Bay started almost with its establishment in 1909. In 1912 Walter Campbell in the journal *The World's Work* painted a glowing picture of the institution's achievements. He wrote in fulsome terms about the women enthusiastically growing vegetables and flowers in soil that was easy to dig. A sufficiency of vegetables, he claimed, was grown to support the entire dietary requirements of the inmates. He depicted the female inmates as enjoying their physical drill based on the Swedish system which, he claimed, kept them in good health and made their bodies "supple and strong" (Campbell 92-97).

Under the derogatory title "Our Social Degenerates" another unnamed commentator in the journal *Grit* in 1917 took on the task of providing the reading public with further positive propaganda about the Women's Reformatory, Long Bay. He portrayed the "great majority" of inmates there as "social derelicts" received from the city police courts, emphasising the high numbers of first offenders. He noted that the prisoners were kept constantly employed on the general work of the institution as well as sewing and knitting for other gaols and government institutions of various kinds. The emphasis on the work ethic accorded well with Rose Scott's basic ideology: "Immense numbers of socks have also been knitted and despatched to War Chest authorities for Australian soldiers on active service" exclaimed the author of the *Grit* article.

He also saw something mystical in the Reformatory's design which, he pointed out, was built in "the form of a circle, the cell ranges and other divisions radiating from a common centre like the wheels from the hub". He wondered joyfully at the "all-pervading exquisite cleanliness and animated cheerfulness displayed by the poor women" who were "neatly garbed, and wear caps of spotless white". He then pointed to the "great deal of tuition" that had been given many of the women in sewing and knitting before they reached a reasonable level of competency in their work.

Inebriates, he claimed, spent the first six months in the ground floor cells and as a result of good conduct and industry - by receiving the requisite number of marks - they were transferred "to light, airy cell bedrooms on the floor above". "The rooms they are permitted to use as though they were their own in fact" he waxed lyrically. They were allowed to decorate them, he claimed, with "photographs, pictures or images".

The return of the prisoners in the Lock Hospital of the Women's Reformatory for 1 September 1909 reveals that there were five women being treated there for either gonorrhoea or syphilis by the Visiting Surgeon. Their sentences ranged from two to six months. Two of the women had been committed for vagrancy, one for stealing, one for assault and one for selling liquor without a licence (Return of Prisoners 191).

During the 1910s, women who were committed to the Women's Reformatory were assigned to one of three tasks: laundry, needlework and sweeping. Their charges ranged from indecent language to soliciting, keeping a disorderly house, drunkenness, assault, stealing and vagrancy (Return of Prisoners 191). It was a relatively small range of petty crimes: the assaults were mainly made against arresting police. The indecent language charge was often a device used by police to arrest known or suspected streetwalkers. Thus Rose Scott's contention that prison was inappropriate for prostitutes was neatly subverted by justice authorities.

A series of regulations were framed to control every aspect of inmates' behaviour whilst
in prison. They were required to observe certain disciplinary instructions, to obey the orders of officers, to maintain to their fellow inmates "politeness and decorum" and to do certain tasks "while not excessive, requiring constant effort". The regulations were so framed as to bring "sure advancement" for industry and "sure regression" for idleness. The development of "self-control" was claimed to be the central purpose of such regulations.

The old marching exercise in silence in circular fashion of the Victorian era was replaced by a new system of physical drill or exercise. The new exercise, based on the Swedish method, was especially prepared and introduced into the women's prison by the Deputy Comptroller-General himself. It was enthusiastically claimed that it had a "marked effect" on the "general conduct of the inmates" as demonstrated by the "ready compliance with orders, orderly marching and smart erect deportment". The exercise period was followed by a "cold shower bath". It was claimed that as a result the inmate was "brighter and cheerful" and commenced "the day's task with good will" (Urquhart).

The treatment of the female prisoner from arrival to departure was carefully structured and orchestrated in fine detail along Foucauldian lines (Foucault). On entry there was a "solitary requirement" then a period in the "probationary division" where "the medical aspect" was at times paramount, particularly for inebriates and those with venereal disease. The Visiting Surgeon prescribed a complete regime of treatment and diet. When the Visiting Surgeon certified that the inmate was fit for ordinary treatment she was placed in the "ordinary division" which had three grades: Lower, Intermediate and Higher.

On entering the ordinary division the inmate was usually placed in the Intermediate Grade and received the No.2 scale of ration. For misconduct the "patient" could be reduced to the Lower Grade. After earning full marks for one month in the Intermediate Grade, the more generous No.3 ration was allowed. After earning full marks for a further period of a month a better food diet was again allowed. As a reward for a further period of four months on full marks, one pint of sweetened tea in liquid form was provided at morning meals. After earning 360 marks in the Intermediate Grade the inmate was eligible for promotion to the Higher Grade. On entering the Higher Grade further privileges were gained: an extension of time in the evening with the electric light on to enable reading and hobby activities, attendance at lectures and permission to purchase from earnings certain articles as indulgences. After a period of three months in the Higher Grade on full marks the inmate could be further promoted into the Special Class where privileges were further extended "as to play games of chess, draughts, dominoes, etc.". In each case of advancement the case was first submitted to the Head of the Department of Prisons with full particulars. The Visiting Magistrate could withhold marks in cases of misconduct (Urquhart).

The incarcerated women at the model prison at Long Bay also received counselling and support by the Ladies Committee of the Prisoners' Aid Society which had been re-formed in 1901 under Neitenstein's encouragement after being defunct during part of the 1890s. The women workers of the new Prisoners' Aid Society were all energetic and prominent middle-class Sydney philanthropists and included Rose Scott as President. With Neitenstein's keen support they had been successful in their advocacy of the establishment of a half-way home - "a via media from the discipline of gaol life to that of complete freedom in the case of the better class of women". This was housed at the Shaftesbury Institution as an adjunct to the Women's Reformatory for those women inmates - mainly inebriates - who had progressed successfully through the marks system and who were seen to be respectable prisoners worthy of a more intensive reform program that was geographically separate from the Women's Reformatory at Long Bay itself, but still under its governance (M.S.).

Many of the women who eventually had found their way into the Women's Reformatory at Long Bay had had a long, sad history of institutionalisation. In 1910 a number of their case studies were recorded by William Urquhart, the officer-in-charge (Urquhart). Gay P.,
inmate of the Girls’ Industrial School, Parramatta, had been released into the care of her father in 1908. Her subsequent bad behaviour caused him to hand her over to the care of the Salvation Army home at Stanmore. She was eventually sent to a situation at Lockhart but soon absconded. Later she was convicted for vagrancy at Wagga Wagga Police Court and was sent from there to Long Bay.

There was also the case of Fanny K__ who had done no regular "honest" work for a long time. She had received fourteen charges of stealing, four charges of vagrancy and two charges of being drunk and using bad language. Fanny had been brought up in the Government Orphan School at Parramatta and on her liberation, according to the authorities, had adopted a life of crime. Urquhart pointed out that after completing her current sentence she desired to enter the Newington Asylum and end her days there. Her wish was to be granted. While she was only fifty, she looked much older, and it was claimed that she was feeble-minded. She had spent the greater part of her life after leaving the residential orphan school either in prison at Long Bay or in the Newington Asylum. Urquhart conceded that her conduct while in prison was good and she worked "fairly well". On reception she was wearing an old pair of men's boots. For such a woman there was little meaning to life outside institutionalisation. Many similar records indicated that a significant number of women who ended up at Long Bay had spent the term of their natural childhood either at the government orphan house or the Girls’ Industrial School, which had without a doubt successfully trained them for a continued life of institutionalisation in adulthood.

Alice, who was about eighteen in 1910, had had several successive charges: six counts of vagrancy, two of riotous behaviour and one of indecent behaviour. While Urquhart found her to be strong and hardworking in prison, she had been drinking, according to him, and living an immoral life in the Dubbo district for several years. He then made the unenviable Victorian claim that there was "not much hope of reformation" because of her record.

Minnie E__ had four previous charges of riotous behaviour as a common prostitute, three counts of drunkenness, and one other of riotous behaviour. In 1910, however, she was serving a six months sentence in Long Bay and she was due for licence on 14 November 1910. Her husband had been recently visiting her while in prison and it was decided that she be allowed to live with him on the grounds "that he was now in regular employment" as a fitter. There was, then, a flicker of hope in this particular story in the official chronicles.

Margaret C___, however, had been for twenty years living on the proceeds of prostitution. She had been born in Ireland and was a Roman Catholic. Against her name she had seventeen vagrancy charges, seven stealing charges, eleven riotous behaviour charges and nine indecent language and assault charges. She was also considered "lazy in person". On discharge, it was claimed, she wished to return to Orange the scene of many of her crimes (Urquhart).

Fifteen years later Dulcie Deamer summed up the situation of such women, vividly and succinctly:

But these women, like the men who worked in the wind-swept open between the upper and lower walls, were not of the folk one sees in streets and trams, and on ferry wharves and in ice cream parlours. One glimpses their kind, sometimes, among the broken garbage cans of city alleys, and in dubious wine-bars or in the shadows of still more dubious, half-shuttered shops. They were not so much a sub-race as off-scourings and discards. (18)

She recreates in powerful images life in the backstreets of Darlinghurst and King’s Cross that she encountered on a daily basis as a resident.

Deamer then uses the words of the matron of the institution, which reinforce in 1925 the central themes of the recorded case studies of 1910: "Hardly any of these have anything..."
like a real home to go when they leave here". Deamer then points to the lower crime rates for women and that women in "possession of homes" and the average "women of cities and suburbs and countryside, never come in the scope of the law". In other words it is mainly the derelict and marginalised that did.

Having referred to the model prison earlier as a hospital and a zoo, Deamer then adds the image of a kindergarten:

A women's prison should be termed rather a kindergarten - a rigid kindergarten for those female children who never grow up, or a hospital for those whose inner lives are incurably afflicted. (18)

To quite a few, in the course of our tour, the matron spoke by name, praising this or that, and these look up at her like pleased but half-nervous children. One almost expected to see her pat them on the head as one pats a farmyard animal that has done its work. (57)

In her short article Deamer decisively predates Michel Foucault's 1975 theory of the modern prison as a disciplinary form where all the coercive technologies of behaviour are concentrated: "cloister, prison, school and regiment" (Foucault 293). In Deamer's interpretation we have "prison, kindergarten, hospital and zoo" as interlacing coercive technologies of behaviour creating far-reaching networks that provide a continuous and compelling training for the hapless inmates. This is compounded by Deamer's chilling image of the cell in which the women are separately placed at four o'clock every afternoon until six o'clock the following morning:

The cells, when their massive, hermetic doors were closed, resembled the interior of a strong room. Save for a tier of corner shelves, they are utterly bare, the canvas hammock slung across their breadth at night being rolled up outside during working hours. They were not like the abodes of human beings; they were certainly not like the dens of animals. No, they were the cold pigeon-holes of a giant filing cabinet. (57)

Images of cleanliness and regularity also dominate in Deamer's descriptions of the Women's Reformatory: "another inhumanly immaculate threshold", "bathrooms - cleaner than anything on earth except the wards of the prison hospital" and "more scrupulously scoured than the gallery of a man-o'-war" (18, 57).

Deamer then catches a glimpse of the presence of someone in the prison who may not "subside into the condition of an animal whom one pats on the head for mechanical work well done". This someone is not actually sighted, it is only her distinctive possessions in the hospital ward that we are allowed to view:

And in a corner of one of these wards, partly screened off, a cup and saucer in canary yellow and black - the kind that graces elegant afternoon teas - sat on a stool, and nearby were a pair of black satin boudoir slippers with high heels. (57)

The matron explains that this person was awaiting her trial. No-one else in the prison of 140 inmates, Deamer postulates, ever owned black satin boudoir slippers. One element of middle class crime was found in an institution almost completely inhabited by the down-and-out, the marginalised and the destitute.

And so Deamer finally reaches her devastating conclusion about Rose Scott's experiment at the model prison in therapeutic behavioural modification:

So the Reformatory, with all its efficiency and beautiful machinery of hygiene and humane discipline, was much sadder than any hospital, for a hospital is a place of great hope. Here there was indeed no need to grave "Hope Abandon" above the entrance. For the majority of those entering there had never really been any hope to lay aside. (57)
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