



The Separate Prison - Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania. Image courtesy Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority.

## UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara\*

The Australian government would like to wind back the clock by culling rabbits, cats and other foreign animals that have wreaked havoc there during the last couple of centuries. That may prove feasible, but it is definitely far too late to eliminate another import introduced by British colonialists — chronometry. Before the First Fleet unloaded convicts in 1787, human beings had been living on the continent for about 50,000 years, but they had felt no compulsion to measure out those long millennia.

By the early nineteenth century, the strict time-tables of life on board ship had been permanently transferred to the land. Nowhere did this regulatory regime operate more harshly than in prisons. A surgeon from the transport convoys explained that ‘in a piece of machinery — a watch for example — every wheel, however small, in order to secure the accurate working of the whole, must move with absolute precision, and correctly accomplish its assigned portion of work in a given time. So it must be with us.’

During the long years that prisoners served out the time of their sentence, they were disciplined on a daily basis. The hours of meals, work and exercise were strictly meted out,

each marked by a bell so that every day crawled past with clockwork regularity. Some early penitentiaries were even designed like the face of a clock, with the numbered cells arranged around the perimeter so that a warder based at the centre could constantly rotate his gaze to ensure that all was quiet.

The most sophisticated — the most ferocious — system of surveillance was based on London’s Pentonville Prison but developed to an extreme in 1848 at the large Port Arthur complex in Tasmania. Intended to confine the most dangerous offenders, a grim circular building was constructed at the top of a hill, surrounded by high walls. Now restored, it lies incongruously close to palm trees lining the nearby ocean shore, and also to a ruin surviving from a different era — the guts of a tourist café destroyed in 1996 when a lone gunman massacred thirty-five people.

Designed with savage ingenuity, this unique penal institution kept each prisoner in perpetual isolation while simultaneously monitoring the guards charged with their supervision. The warders were posted at the central hub, which doubled up as a small exercise yard for the single hour of the day out of his cell permitted to each prisoner not being

punished by perpetual isolation. From the custodians' inspection post, three gloomy corridors of single-occupancy cells stretched out as if to the 6, 9 and 12 of a clock dial.

The fourth arm pointed due east, because it was a chapel — but this was a chapel with a difference. Although the preacher could survey every member of the congregation lined up in front of him in steeply ranked pews, individual prisoners were separated by a screen from those on either side, so that communication or eye-contact became impossible.

The most sinister device was a twelve-hour watch clock, an adaptation of the noctuary or tell-tale clocks devised at the end of the eighteenth century. In this version, the revolving dial had numbers but no hands, and it imposed mind-numbing punctuality on prison employees. Forty-eight brass pegs were arranged round the clock's rim, and exactly every 15 minutes the officer on duty was required to release the lever that dislodged the next peg. At the end of each shift, any lapses from duty would be revealed to the Head Keeper by those remaining unmoved.

However punitive this regime might sound, it originated in the desire to reform a criminal's character. Similarly, missionary projects undertook to civilize the supposedly primitive aboriginal inhabitants by forcing them to adopt British schedules. For Evangelicals who put themselves in charge of redeeming lost souls, time was not merely a scientific phenomenon, but also carried a moral charge: following its dictates faithfully indicated a virtuous life. 'See that ye walk circumspectly,' the Methodist preacher John Wesley admonished his followers, 'saving all the time you can for the best purposes; buying up every fleeting moment out of the hands of sin and Satan.'

Main source: Graeme Davison, *The Unforgiving Minute* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993).

\*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is number nine in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.