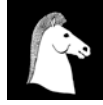




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Trees of Gold and Men Made Good? Grand Visions and Early Experiments in Penal Forestry in New South Wales, 1913–1938

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ABSTRACT

While modern penal institutions exist, putatively, to transform the people held within them into law-abiding citizens, it is not generally recognised that since the early twentieth century, Australian and New Zealand penal systems have also sought to transform ‘wastelands’ into ordered, productive landscapes. In Australia, this experiment began in 1913 on the north coast of New South Wales, where small groups of prisoners were set to work creating a pine plantation. Penologists and foresters saw themselves as the architects of a grand project; men with ‘wasted lives’ would reclaim ‘wasted land’, and, in the process, reclaim themselves. Depraved city-dwelling criminals would be transformed into hardy, upright bushmen, while the unproductive native landscapes would be replaced by useful exotic softwood forests. Although these reforms were hailed as modern and progressive, a close study of the history of this scheme reveals that a range of relationships to landscapes, some very old indeed, are deeply embedded in historical understandings of human rehabilitation.

KEYWORDS

Penal/environmental history, forestry, wasteland, redemption, progressivism

INTRODUCTION

Penal forestry in Australia began in 1913, with the establishment of a prison afforestation camp at Tuncurry, in the north coast district of New South Wales. Since then pine forests have risen under the hands of prisoners in all the Australian states, except Tasmania. Many of the landscapes which these forests

replaced were regarded by foresters as wastelands; native forests on poor soils that supported alarming and unpredictable regimes of fire, and produced timber too slowly for markets and too hard to be easily fashioned. In the place of these unruly and unproductive indigenous ecosystems, foresters imagined ordered ranks of fast growing exotic softwoods, easily workable and free from flame. The making of these forests would also, they and their colleagues in the prisons departments hoped, be the making of the previously unruly and unproductive men who sowed them; men who had fallen or slipped would be made upright, like the trees themselves. The first of these camps was the Tuncurry Afforestation Camp, and its history traces the lifespan of the briefly held faith, shared by foresters and penologists, that fallen men could redeem wasted landscapes, and redeem themselves in the process. The hope lasted only a few decades, approximating the lifespan of the Tuncurry camp, 1913–38. The camp system proved reasonably successful as a penal proposition, but the landscape – at Tuncurry at least – proved a little more recalcitrant.

Camps such as that at Tuncurry rode the crest of a powerful wave of penological thinking. International penology had styled itself as a science since the late nineteenth century, and it had assembled a number of powerful metaphors to buttress this claim. In place of older ideas about punitive justice calibrated to particular crimes, scientific penologists now spoke of ‘treatment’; the treatment of criminals, rather than the punishment of crime. They developed the medical metaphor inherent in the word ‘treatment’ into a fully-fledged manifesto. Crime should, they said, now be seen as a moral illness; ergo, prisons should be thought of, and become, moral hospitals. This self-consciously modern, scientific approach to criminal justice parallels many items on the progressive social agenda of the early twentieth century. This line of thinking led directly to such innovations as the indeterminate sentence, where the length of detention was not decided by the trial judge, but by the prison officials, who were, they claimed, the only ones in a position to determine when an individual might be ‘cured’ of his deviant tendencies. Doctors, as penologists were quick to point out, let no one tell them when they must discharge their patients. Of all their moral sanatoria, penologists held the greatest hopes for, and made the largest claims for, prison farms and prison forestry camps.¹

The world’s first prison afforestation camp was established in New Zealand, in January 1901 at Waitapu. Further camps followed at Hanmer Springs in 1903 and Dumgree and the Waipa Valley in 1904. By the end of 1908 around 15 million trees had been planted across 5000 acres. They were lauded as a great success. Nevertheless, prison forestry in New Zealand was a short-lived experiment. The camps were closed in 1920, so that the prisoners’ labour could instead be used for farming and land reclamation. The forest camps were, however, operational long enough to spark a similar experiment on the other side of the Tasman Sea.²

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In early 1911, William Holman, the NSW Minister for Justice and Attorney-General, visited New Zealand and while there 'interested himself' in the experiments being made with prison labour in that country, 'and arrived at the conclusion that the system might with advantage be tried' in New South Wales. Richard Dalrymple Hay, the NSW Director of Forestry, conscious of a serious shortage of softwood timber and the high costs of labour at the time, was enthused too. He wrote: 'I feel certain it could be applied with advantage to forest works in this State.'³

After some debate over the best place to site such a project, the Tuncurry Afforestation Camp, the first substantial pine plantation in NSW, was established in 1913, on 1214 hectares of crown land on the north coast, a little less than 30 kilometres south of the town of Taree, and around 300 kilometres north of Sydney. The nearby township of Tuncurry lies at approximately 32 degrees south and 152 degrees east. This was – and is – a land of beaches, rivers and lakes. The name appears to be a transliteration of the Aboriginal word 'Tukaree', meaning 'silver fish, plenty fish'. And, here on the coast, there was little for people to do but fish, as the sandy soils were too infertile for agriculture. Foresters, however, believed that land ill-suited for farming could be profitably used for forestry. William MacFarlane, the NSW Comptroller-General of Prisons agreed; 'The site, while suitable for the purpose of afforestation, is really waste land, and consists mostly of sand dunes useless for other purposes.' He also described the site's original vegetation – mostly eucalypts – as 'stunted' and 'valueless'.⁴

The official opening of the camp in 1913 attracted a good deal of media attention, much of which predictably centred on the issues surrounding discipline and the ease of escape. Holman was quick to play down such fears; he reassured the public that only a very particular type of prisoner would be sent to the camp. 'No one who has been imprisoned for crimes of violence or for sexual offences will be considered', he said. The authorities clearly hoped that those who were sent to the camp would choose to stay in the country, and in many ways the scheme was another example of the long history of (mostly failed) attempts to promote an Australian yeomanry. Provisions would be made for teaching prisoners 'the scientific side of agriculture', said Holman, in the hope that

these men ... to whom a prison record would be a bar to further employment, will be given a taste for agricultural work, and of ultimately becoming landholders on a small scale. A new life will be opened to them.⁵

Initial indications suggested that the experiment would be a successful one. The conduct of the first cohorts of prisoners was 'exemplary', announced MacFarlane. They were, he went on, 'cheerful, obedient and industrious, and they revel in the hard healthy work they have been called upon to perform'. Hay, in his report for the year 1913–14, assured his superiors that 'the health of the prisoners has been excellent, their conduct good, and the scheme has so far proved a great success'. For over two decades small groups of prisoners were set to work

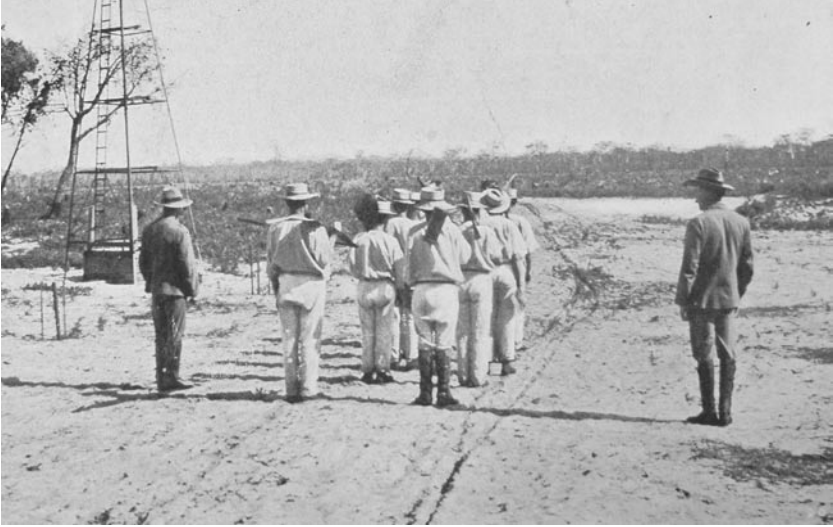


FIGURE 1. Work party at Tuncurry, 1918 (NSW Department of Prisons, *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales for the year 1918*)

at the camp, clearing and burning native scrub, planting pine trees, building firebreaks and suppressing the regrowth. All in all, approximately 1700 men passed through the camp. The key to the experiment was the ‘Honor System’; the prisoners were housed in individual huts that were locked at night, but by day they worked largely free of supervision, sometimes at great distances from the camp. Despite this degree of liberty, escapes were few. Indeed, it was not until 1926, thirteen years after the opening of the camp, that the first successful escape took place.⁶

RECLAIMING LAND: SAND, FIRE AND THE TREE OF GOLD

The Tuncurry camp was an experiment for foresters as well as penologists. The location presented foresters with an opportunity to grapple with a number of the great challenges presented by Australian landscapes: poor quality, shifting soils, alarming fire regimes, and low-grade timber. Results achieved with fast growing conifers in other countries, particularly France, gave Australian foresters reason to hope that these problems could be overcome.

French foresters had turned a barren sandy waste of two and a half million acres, at Landes, on the south-western coast, into an enormous, productive pine forest in a little over 70 years. This coast had been, according to one Australian report, ‘composed of bare wild, shifting sandhills, which were at the mercy of every Atlantic storm’. According to another Australian report:

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The Landes consisted of a vast sand waste, supporting only scanty vegetation ... In the winter ... the country was a series of lakes and marshes, while in the summer the hot sun ... left the place practically a desert ... In this country the social conditions were pitiable ... A scanty livelihood was made [by the inhabitants] raising sheep on the sand plains.⁷

The new forests, however, protected the dunes from 'the hungry sea', and made Landes one of the most heavily timbered and wealthy departments in France. At the same time, the population of the area quadrupled, and the nomadic shepherds were replaced by 'picturesque hamlets and villages' with 'foresters' huts, nestling amid the pines'. The new landscape inspired romantic visions: 'To watch from the "dunes" the setting sun slowly vanish beneath the waste of waters, transforming beach, sea, and forest into glory of crimson and gold, is a sight not easily forgotten.'⁸

The tree responsible for this extraordinary, almost biblical, transformation from a squalid pastoral existence to a flourishing forest economy was the maritime pine, *Pinus pinaster*. Through its success in France it acquired the sobriquet 'the tree of gold'.⁹

The French example was an instructive one for Australian foresters, who were themselves grappling with the problem of stabilising shifting sands in various parts of the country. As *The Australian Forestry Journal* put it in 1920:

there are many places, both on the coast and in the interior of the Commonwealth, where sand-drifts have caused much damage, and are certain to continue to do so, unless intelligent measures are initiated with the view of stopping the onward and disastrous advances. France furnishes some remarkable object lessons in regard to what may be done by skill and enterprise to recover lost land and to prevent the onward march of drifting sands.¹⁰

Large tracts of coastal land were 'either already covered by drift sands or ... in danger of encroachment'. It was a matter of 'public interest' that these areas 'be reclaimed or made safe by planting with suitable trees'. In the same year a Western Australian forester warned that a rising population 'and the pushing forward of agriculture round the coastal belt' meant that it would become 'necessary to take these sand-drifts in hand, fix them and reforest them with pines'. There was, he insisted, 'no reason why shifting sands should be permitted to spread or encroach on arable or other valuable land. The forester's science provides a remedy'.¹¹

Afforestation on sandy country could then either save the sand from the 'hungry sea' or the land from the 'hungry sand'. The dunes at Tuncurry had previously been held in place by the native vegetation and no significant problem was posed by erosion. Nevertheless, foresters around the country followed the Tuncurry experiment with interest; if marketable pines could be grown in the sand dunes of the North Coast, there was hope that the shifting sands in other parts of the country could be halted at reasonable cost. The two species

of pine selected for the experiment were *Pinus pinaster* and *P. radiata*, or *P. insignis* as it was then known. The latter, a native of California, had acquired the nickname ‘the remarkable pine’, on account of its prodigiously rapid growth in New Zealand and Australia.¹²

The dunes could only be stabilised, however, if fire was excluded from the forest. In these early days of organised forestry in Australia, foresters regarded wildfire as anathema to the forest, and dreamt of the day they might tame the flames. Many wrote and spoke of fire in the language of militarism. It was ‘war’ and fire was the ‘enemy’. Following the lines of the logic of war, as many did in those years, foresters such as David Hutchins believed that fire was a threat to only the poorly organised forest; in such a forest the flammable undergrowth was the source of the problem. When a forest became ‘fully stocked’, in Hutchins’ words, the close growth of the trees would block out the light and kill the undergrowth, leaving only a rich, moist, almost fire-proof humus on the forest floor. At Tuncurry, foresters sought to create a fully stocked forest from scratch, and prisoners spent thousands of man-hours organising it, building and maintaining firebreaks, clearing the undergrowth while they waited for the canopy to close, and taking turns during the summer months watching for tell-tale plumes of smoke rising above the plantation.¹³

RECLAIMING LIVES: REHABILITATION, MASCULINITY, BODIES, LANDSCAPE

For nearly two decades the Tuncurry experiment gave all the indications of success. It was, one observer declared, an excellent means of ‘killing of two birds with one stone – the birds being unproductive lands & criminal proclivities’. Recidivism rates were low, costs were low, and local residents were so impressed with the work performed by their unusual neighbours that many of them offered jobs to discharged prisoners. Indeed, prisoners went about their work so effectively that Charles McArthur, one of their supervising officers, doubted ‘if more would have been done had free labour been employed’.¹⁴ This was all the more astonishing given the prisoners’ backgrounds:

Most of the prisoners employed on this scheme have been prior to conviction, employed at clerical work or other light work, but after a few weeks adapt themselves to almost any line of bushwork ... and become robust and hardy. No doubt the open-air treatment is responsible for this.¹⁵

On arrival at the camp the men ‘are pasty-faced’ said one camp official in 1933. However, after ‘a few weeks in the open-air, amongst the pines and indulging in healthy athletics’, he continued, ‘they become robust, sunburned, and alert’. Visitors to Tuncurry were equally impressed. In May 1917, H.M. Vaughan, the South Australian Attorney-General, visited New South Wales to study the ‘the



FIGURE 2. Tuncurry prisoners at work clearing scrub, 1913 (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML365.3/1A1)

daring innovation' at Tuncurry. He came away favourably impressed. He felt the system allowed individuals 'who have made a mistake or a slip in life to drop into surroundings and a mode of life which will tend to make them men and not flunkeys'. To the extent that it is possible to tell, prisoners themselves seemed convinced of the merits of the scheme, too. The Catholic chaplain to the camp, the Reverend Schmitzer, reported that his charges were 'unanimous' that their experience at the camp would 'enable them to face the world after the sojourn at the Camp – stronger physically, mentally, and morally'.¹⁶

A few prisoners put their gratitude on paper. One wrote shortly after his discharge: 'If it were not that I am married, I would be quite content to stay.' Another declared that he wished

to tender my heartfelt gratitude and thanks for sending me to Tuncurry and my appreciation of the humane treatment I received during my eight months' detention there ... the man who becomes a criminal after leaving there under existing conditions is, in my opinion, a bad man indeed.¹⁷

The wife of yet another was so grateful for the changes she saw in her husband, that she extended an invitation to the Officer-in-Charge:

Perhaps in the near future you may be coming to Sydney, and, if so, would you care to make our home your headquarters? You would find us very homely, so long as the babies do not worry you too much!¹⁸

One prisoner even managed to thank the author of the scheme in person. In May 1918, Holman visited for the first time the prison camp that he had es-

tablished nearly five years before. Following an inspection of the site the men were paraded before the Premier, whereupon Samuel McCauley, the Comptroller-General, asked them if they had anything they wished to say to their guest. Holman and the other official visitors 'were surprised to see a man step forward', who, 'in perfect English and beautifully balanced sentences ... expressed the thanks of the whole of the men to the author of the scheme, which was proving so advantageous'. Holman in turn thanked the prisoners for these 'touching and appreciative words'; they were 'men who had been caught in the meshes of the criminal law', but in McCauley and himself 'they had not enemies, but friends, who were anxious to see no man return to gaol'. The prisoners' spokesman, unidentified in the news reports of the time, was George Cochrane, better known as Grant Madison Hervey. Hervey was a poet, blacksmith, journalist, visionary and swindler who had been convicted of forging and uttering. Before his transfer to Tuncurry, Hervey had spent time at Long Bay and Goulburn prisons; his experience across these three prisons inspired him to take up the cause of prison reform after his release. He railed against the brutal methods of the conventional prisons, but acknowledged that at Tuncurry there was 'a changed tune', even going so far as to claim that it 'was the first sensible thing that was ever done in the prison history of New South Wales'.¹⁹

The physical demands made of the men at Tuncurry were important to Hervey. Once himself described as 'a massively-built, lantern-jawed blacksmith', he believed 'the first thing that is essential to the remaking of a man ... is the recovery of physical tone. The moment that a man's muscles begin to get some spring and quality into them, his mind and morals will tend to improve.' But in NSW's walled prisons, he said, life revolved around the cell and the workshop: stuck for up to seventeen hours out of every twenty-four in a cell alone, or with another prisoner talking 'Rabelaisian sludge', a fallen man had only further to fall. At Tuncurry, however, men were not 'employed in making boots on antiquated lines' but instead 'they work like true pioneers, tearing down the wilderness with the axe'. Prisoners at Tuncurry and those in NSW's conventional prisons were, in Hervey's opinion, essentially the same, however. The only difference between them, was the former's 'pledge ... to act like a man ... and every man Jack honours his parole'.²⁰ The men at Tuncurry were

burglars, racecourse spielers, pillar box thieves – all the indescribable flotsam and jetsam that flows into prison out of the temptation ducts of a great city. And yet, with all their faults, they were ... true to the State. They gave it their labor in the forest, and in return they built up for themselves a magnificent physical tone.²¹

Hervey did harbour a number of reservations about the camp. He believed the labour spent 'laying waste a forest' would be better employed building the roads and developing the land necessary for closer settlement. Hervey had for some years been a darling of *The Bulletin* and to him the Australian bush was not a place of 'weird melancholy'. It was, rather, a nourishing place, and he called it

his 'church' and his 'Alma Mater'. The men at Tuncurry 'worked like tigers' he said, but as a consequence 'a splendid and valuable virgin forest is being torn down, and wantonly burnt, in order to plant pines'.²²

Despite all the words and images produced in support of Tuncurry, it is difficult to quantify its effectiveness. Rehabilitation is a notoriously problematic concept in penology. Reconviction rates are useful measures, but blunt and often misleading. Rather than registering positive changes in ex-prisoners, they simply record a broad-brush absence of continued, detected unlawful behaviour. In the absence of reliable indicators of the success or otherwise of their endeavours, administrators have often fallen back on other, more subjective, emotive evidence. The ex-prisoners' letters were one example. In addition, the camps produced compelling images of men rehabilitated, which administrators were quick to insert into their annual reports and promotional material. These evoked understandings of normative masculinity firmly enshrined in the Australian imagination. The labour of prisoners largely consisted of clearing, felling, burning and sowing (see Figure 2). Images of men engaged at such tasks resonated with a line of imagery of the Australian bushman, hard at work far from the debilitating city, carving a future from the wilderness.

Tuncurry also offered administrators opportunities to showcase more modern civil norms of masculine behaviour. The camp was one of the first prisons in Australia into which organised sport was introduced. In conventional prisons the scope for such activities was limited because of space constraints, but on the smoothed sands of Tuncurry, prisoners played cricket and football, often against teams from the surrounding districts (see Figure 3). From this time sport became increasingly integrated into prisons, and changed quickly from an indulgence to prisoners to being seen as an essential part of any rehabilitation program. So closely associated did understandings of sportsmanship and rehabilitation become, that in many institutions, a genuine attempt at what prisoners called 'going straight' was known to guards and bureaucrats as 'playing the game'.²³

In the camp's early years, a few commentators were unconvinced. Shortly after the Tuncurry camp opened in 1913, a critic writing in *The Bulletin* under the pseudonym 'Lex' offered a rare piece of dissent from the prevailing enthusiasm for the scheme. Lex found 'lurking' in the scheme 'the wish ... to give the NSW prisoner as good a time as possible'. He was also clearly worried about what a group of burly men working up a sweat in the bushes might get up to:

The gathering together for months and years at a time of a number of unmarried men, or men whose wives are necessarily separated from them, is a sizeable enough menace to morality in itself. Proper supervision is impossible in the circumstances.²⁴

The prisoners would botch the work, too. 'The tree-planting is liable to be done carelessly or badly, or both ... it is no game for the inexperienced, being really a branch of agriculture', claimed Lex. 'It has been a failure, economically and



FIGURE 3. Prisoners at Tuncurry, playing cricket, 1918 (NSW Department of Prisons, *Report of the Controller-General of Prisons, New South Wales for the year 1918*)

otherwise ... and the prison authorities in Maoriland have themselves expressed dissatisfaction with it a score of times.' Finally, he believed the scheme provided few opportunities for released prisoners to develop skills that might keep them out of trouble after being released:

When the convict has finished his term he faces the world, under the tree-planting system, without a means of earning a living; for the world has not yet reached the stage where a man may remain solvent by wandering round and planting trees for gain.²⁵

Few shared Lex's reservations, though, and the seeming success of the camp soon silenced any remaining doubters. The proximity of the beach to the camp permitted the presentation of perhaps the most compelling proof of the changes the camp could engender in its inmates. The camp opened at a time when the pre-eminent representation of Australian masculinity was changing from the bushman to the lifesaver. At the camp, regular surf-lifesaving drills were held in the summer months, and on at least one occasion, prisoners were called on to assist in rescues of shipwrecked sailors (See Figure 4). In 1924, J.F. Whitney, the officer-in-charge at Tuncurry, reported that 'the prisoners much appreciate being permitted ... to have an hour in the surf' and that 'a life-saving team has now been chosen ... the line taken out, and the drill performed in a proper manner once a week'. Representing both civic virtue, and physical prowess, there was, in the inter-war years, no more powerful image of acceptable masculinity than the lifesaver. The camp, then, associated prisoners with many of the archetypal forms of Australian masculinity, and each of these forms implies a particular



FIGURE 4. Surf lifesaving drill, Tuncurry, c.1930 (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ML365.3/1A1)

relationship to the land. They are all images of men dominating their environments. Each picture presents a key landscape to the Australian imagination – the bush, the beach, the sporting ground – each of them tamed and controlled by men in turn subject to discipline, playing by the rules. Rehabilitated men and reclaimed land went hand in hand.²⁶

DESERTS INTO WONDERLANDS: TUNCURRY'S TREES OF GOLD

Foresters were as pleased with the progress at Tuncurry as the penologists; the trees seemed as satisfactory as the prisoners. They grew well in the sand; fires, though not entirely banished, were few in number and thanks to the firebreaks, limited in their effect. In 1917, J. Hetherington, one of the penal officers at the camp, reported that 'the pines are looking healthy, and are growing fast, particularly the first year's planting, thousands of which are 8 and 9 feet high'. The following year Herbert Lyne, the district forester, declared 'the pines look splendid.' In the course of the same year bureaucrats at the Prisons Department calculated the value of the forestry work at £2562. It was a figure that must have given them cause for satisfaction; the total value of prison labour for that year was estimated at £2682.²⁷

Richard Dalrymple Hay, now the Chief Commissioner of Forests, was delighted with the project. After years of grappling with the problem of scarce and expensive labour, he found the prisoners at Tuncurry 'do work which compares favourably with that done by free labour elsewhere, and are admirably handled'.

W.J. Code, the Forest Commissioner of Victoria, had been sceptical when he first heard of the plan, but he changed his mind after visiting the camp in 1920. 'I was doubtful about the result when I first heard of the planting on poor coastal sandy soils', he said, 'but any doubt which I had has since been removed by the vigorous growth of the trees which I saw.'²⁸

In 1925, A. Guy, a New Zealand forester, visited the Tuncurry plantation while passing through on his way home from France, where he had inspected the forests at Landes, and from which he had come away deeply impressed. The French forests supplied, he told Australian foresters, 'no fewer than 1,000 tons of pit props per day' to Great Britain alone. Turpentine, paving blocks for the streets of Paris, and resin all added to the value of the trees. The total value of the timber and its products ran 'into millions'. Guy enthused: 'truly, the maritime pine is aptly termed in sunny France "the tree of gold"'. Having inspected the Tuncurry plantation, Guy believed it to be particularly well suited to the maritime pine, even more so than *P. insignis*, and praised Lyne's work with the plantation. The tree of gold 'was the tree for the sand dunes'. Guy felt that the work at places like Tuncurry was only the beginning of a vast, magnificent project, that would 'literally cause sandy deserts to be clothed with forests, and so beautiful will they be that children will walk under the trees as in a wonderland'.²⁹

Tuncurry seemed a wonderland to others, too. Just as remarkable transformations were observed in the men at the camp, the landscape, too, seemed miraculously changed. Snakes, though plentiful in the area, were said to be nowhere to be seen at the camp itself. Not only was the serpent banished from the garden, but the native wildlife at the camp lived in almost biblical amity



FIGURE 5. Young pines at Tuncurry, 1918 (NSW Department of Prisons, *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales for the year 1918*)

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with the people there. In 1923, James Pringle, a journalist, visited the camp. He was told, by the prisoners, 'the story of the wallaby which had been caught surfing'. One day, this wallaby, nicknamed Nibs by the men, was seen 'surfing with his face to the rollers. Hearing shouts, he looked round and tried to escape by swimming, but was caught'. Pringle was disinclined to believe the tale, but when he went to the beach himself he saw for himself 'a large wallaby, who, held by the tail, hopped along in front' of a group of laughing prisoners returning from a swim. He then accepted the story 'without reservation'. The camp's domestic animals also seemed somehow elevated, to Pringle. On the day of the visit, Mick, the 'old camp gee-gee' was required to put 'a solid sixteen hours' pulling the cart through the sand, from the camp to the beach and back. It was 'hard collar-work', according to the superintendent, but Mick 'never flinched'; he 'appeared to know that something was expected of him', which, according to Pringle was 'the spirit animating the afforestation camp at Tuncurry'.³⁰

MINTING THE TREES OF GOLD?

Foresters and prison officials spent years happily calculating just how much gold they expected their wonderland to generate. In 1926, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that a net return of about £150 an acre was anticipated. 'Experts regard this estimate as conservative and it is suggested that much of the area should be worth up to £500 an acre', the paper added. By the early 1930s, however, signs were mounting that the experiment was faltering. The growth of the trees slowed. Many, particularly the more recent plantings, were discoloured and disfigured. Many were damaged by rabbit and virus attacks. Kim Kessell, the leading Western Australian forester, investigated the plantation during his survey of forestry in NSW in 1933. Although he was impressed by the penological dimensions of the scheme, he found the trees in poor shape. The encouraging growth seen in many of the early plantings was due, he said, to the original stands of eucalypt on the site. These had been felled and burned, providing reasonable conditions for the planting. Ironically, the original vegetation, derided as stunted and useless, was the only reason the new vegetation had thrived at all.³¹

A second survey in 1937 was conducted by B. Byles, who found that the plantation was in an even more dismal state than Kessell had suggested. The sand lacked a number of important nutrients, particularly zinc. The plantation was, according to Byles 'a 99 per cent failure and is one of the three poorest plantations in the state.' Many of the *P. radiata* stands were, Byles reported, nothing more than 'scattered feathery spindles waving over a mass of scrub'. The *P. pinaster*, the 'tree of gold', was also 'diseased and malformed ... The climate is totally unsuited to this species', said Byles. He urged quick action:

In the past, plantations which were obviously failures have been maintained and extended in order to avoid the decision to cut the losses incurred and in the hope

that something would be made of them. A clear cut decision is now essential and it is recommended that the Prison Camp be removed.³²

Following Byles's report, Lewis Martin, the Justice Minister, visited the camp. He found it 'to be as it had been set out in the expert report ... useless and a waste of money'. The total loss on the camp, he announced, totalled £75,000.³³

News of these developments, as well as rumours of future plans for the area, were not welcomed in Tuncurry township. Word of plans to turn the area into a camp for Aboriginal people from nearby Purfleet and Forster reached the town. T.H. Chapman, the secretary of the Tuncurry Progress Association, wrote to his local member of parliament to express his organisation's ire at this proposal. It would, he cried, be 'a retrograde step and against the interests of Tuncurry.' The members of the association were also anxious to point out that

many local people have spent large sums of money improving their property to cope with Tuncurry's increasing popularity as a tourist resort, and to have aborigines placed alongside of us is objectionable from every point of view.³⁴

Aboriginal people were regarded by the Association 'as a most undesirable crowd of people'. Why, Chapman asked, could they not be shifted 'miles away where they will not be a nuisance to white people?' Furthermore, he warned, 'it is rumoured that once these people are sent to Tuncurry Afforestation Camp they will fire this valuable and magnificent forest of pines and destroy it.'³⁵

Locals disagreed with the foresters' assessment of the state of Tuncurry's pine forests. A number of them were active in the timber industry and were aware that softwood timber was in short supply in Sydney. There were, they claimed, '500,000 marketable trees at Tuncurry Camp which should be milled ... the local mills would only be too glad to cut the timber, and the shipping is handy.'³⁶

Tuncurry's trees of gold were, however, never minted. With removal of the camp, the Forestry Commission was obliged to devise an interim fire protection plan for the plantation. Four forest guards, a utility truck and various pieces of fire fighting equipment were stationed at the plantation prior to the departure of the prisoners in February 1938. The men and equipment were in place by the end of December 1937, but heavy rain just before the New Year prompted the department to transfer them to other areas at greater risk of bushfire. Three weeks later a large fire swept through the plantation burning all 2,662,000 trees. No one suggested Aboriginal people were to blame. Guy's vision of happy, wandering children at Tuncurry was not lost with the fire, though. The camp site itself was relatively untouched by the flames, and was subsequently leased by a local family, who developed it into a tourist resort, which they called 'The Pines'.³⁷

CONCLUSION

What are we to make of this strange, and mostly forgotten experiment with prisoners and pines? The system of prison camps has endured; while it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate their overall penological significance, it can be said that as an alternative to traditional imprisonment, for a small portion of the prison population, the camps were – and continue to be – cheap and relatively humane. Even when the failings of the plantation were revealed no one suggested the penology behind the camp was unsound. Precisely how effective Tuncurry was at achieving its stated aim of arresting recidivism is difficult to tell. The reconviction rates for the camp compare favourably against the prison population as a whole, but it is important to note that in general only ‘the better sort of prisoner’ was sent to Tuncurry, and reconviction rates for other camps with different prisoner profiles were considerably higher. Indeed, Tuncurry’s peculiar prisoner profile once prompted then leader of the opposition, Jack Lang, to dub it ‘a gentleman’s club’. So it is difficult to evaluate the claims made for the camp. What *is* certain is that Tuncurry was an effective flagship for a penal bureaucracy at pains to distance itself from the so-called ‘bad old days’ of punitive justice, and to demonstrate a commitment to a modern, progressive rehabilitation programme.³⁸

The actual penological value of Tuncurry aside, the perceived results of the experiment there helped to change the course of Australian penal history, and to a small extent the history of Australian forestry. In 1926 – at the height of the optimism over the scheme – William McKell, the premier, announced that a second camp would be established in the Southern Tablelands; within a decade there were others on the south coast, in the Blue Mountains and near Glen Innes in the north of the state. By the mid-1930s prisoners were working in plantations in Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland. In 1937 – *after* the failure of the Tuncurry plantation – Lewis Martin, the NSW Justice Minister, declared the camp system so successful his state need never again build another conventional, walled gaol.³⁹

In forestry terms though, after the failure of the pines at Tuncurry, foresters lost interest in penal forestry. Lessons about fire management and the soil conditions required by exotic conifers had been learned. Although more camps were established, they were small and the calibre of the labour was mixed. For foresters grappling with a drastically inadequate supply of softwood timber, the camps were of little more than passing interest.

The camp at Tuncurry was the product of innovations in penological and silvicultural thought, but it is also part of another narrative, a story that the American environmental historian, Carolyn Merchant, would call ‘the garden of Eden story’; sinners in a fallen world, both world and sinners made good, deserts blooming, animals and men living in harmony. On the other hand, it is a tale of Eden denied – a golden vision thwarted by a recalcitrant landscape. In

the end the dunes failed to bloom, fire was not banished, the wonderland wasn't to be. It was, moreover, like many utopian dreams, deeply entangled with ideas of race and gender, and the story of the camp shows the ways in which expressions of these ideas imply particular relationships to landscapes. The history of these camps is now little known and little told and of the few who know it and tell it, most are current or former prison administrators, or their commissioned authors. They only know and tell the secular tale; to them the camps are simply another milestone on the road to a modern, humane, enlightened prison system; comforting proof of our distance from the punitive practices of the past. There is certainly some truth to this; but dreams of redemption through working the land have been dreamed for a great many years. In Australian history, the land has always been, as in the words of the historical geographer J.M. Powell, 'the perennial omnipotent panacea'. Without understanding this second, deeper, backward-looking narrative it is impossible to understand how, for a few years in the first half of last century, it was not difficult to believe that the evil in men's hearts and the wasted parts of their world might be put right with one stroke.⁴⁰

NOTES

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³ William M. MacFarlane, *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1911* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1912); 'Cheap Labour – Prisoners at Tree Planting', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 May 1911.

⁴ Dawn McMaster, *Wallis Lake: Its Rivers and Villages* (Tuncurry: Wallamba & District Historical Society, 1994), np; *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1914* (Sydney: New South Wales Department of Prisons, 1915).

⁵ 'Prison Work – Afforestation Camp', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 November 1913; 'Prisoners in the Bush – Afforestation Camp', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1911.

⁶ R.D. Hay, *Report of the Forestry Department for the Year Ended 30th June, 1914* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1914); William M. MacFarlane, *Report of the Comptroller-General*

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of Prisons, *New South Wales, for the Year 1913* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1914); 'Prisoner Escapes – Savage Attack on Warder', *The Argus*, 18 September 1926.

⁷ J.B. White, 'Miracle of Gascony's Pine', *Australian Forestry Journal* 2 (1919): 192–3.

⁸ Anon., 'A Rich Estate in France – Once a Marshy Waste', *Australian Forestry Journal* 6, 1 (1923): 10–11.

⁹ Anon., 'New South Wales Afforestation: Wealth from Sandhills', *Australian Forestry Journal* 8, 2 (1925): 36–7. In Australia, the term 'the tree of gold' was more commonly applied to the native red cedar (*Toona ciliata*) than to *P. pinaster*.

¹⁰ Anon., 'Fixing Sand-Drifts', *Australian Forestry Journal* 3 (1920): 349–51.

¹¹ Anon., 'Fixing Sand-Drifts', 351.

¹² See Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform, 1860–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ch. 4.

¹³ D.E. Hutchins, *A Discussion of Australian Forestry, with Special Reference to Forestry in Western Australia, the Necessity of an Australian Forest Policy, and Notices of Organised Forestry in Other Parts of the World* (Perth: Government Printer, 1916), 28.

¹⁴ 'Tuncurry Afforestation Camp Visitors' Book', (1913–38), 25 May 1917, State Records of New South Wales (hereinafter SRNSW) 5/1620; *Report of the Department of Agriculture for the Year Ended 30 June 1915* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1915).

¹⁵ *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1915* (Sydney: New South Wales Department of Prisons, 1916).

¹⁶ 'Tuncurry Camp – a Gaol without Walls – Modern Penal System', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1933; 'Tuncurry Afforestation Camp', *Northern Champion*, 30 May, 1917; *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1916* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1917).

¹⁷ 'Tuncurry Camp – a Gaol without Walls – Modern Penal System'.

¹⁸ 'Tuncurry Camp – a Gaol without Walls – Modern Penal System'.

¹⁹ 'Prison Work – Afforestation Scheme', *Daily Telegraph*, 1 May 1918; Grant M. Hervey, 'Leg Irons, the Lash and the Gallows-Tree', *The Daily Mail*, 9 May 1922.

²⁰ Michael Cannon, *That Damned Democrat: John Norton, an Australian populist, 1858–1916*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 39; 'Ex-Prisoner', 'The Cure for the Man in Gaol', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 1922.

²¹ 'Ex-Prisoner', 'The Cure for the Man in Gaol'

²² Grant M. Hervey, 'Prison Reform', *The Daily Mail*, 19 May 1922; Hervey, *Australians Yet and Other Verses*, (Sydney: Standard Publishing Company, 1913), 57–8.

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²⁴ 'Lex', 'The Employment of Prison Labor', *The Bulletin*, 11 December 1913.

²⁵ 'Lex', 'The Employment of Prison Labor'.

²⁶ James M. Pringle, 'Planting Pines by Prison Labour at Tuncurry, NSW', *Australian Forestry Journal* 7, 7 (1924): 183; *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1924* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1925), 17–18; Kay Saunders, "'Specimens of Superb Manhood": the Lifesaver as National Icon', *Journal of Australian Studies* 56 (1998); Nancy Cushing and Leone Huntsman, 'Surf lifesaving

and Australian culture and society' in Ed Jaggard (ed.), *Between the Flags: One Hundred Summers of Australian Surf Lifesaving* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006), 1–21.

²⁷ *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1917*, (Sydney: Government Printer, 1918); *Report of the Comptroller-General of Prisons, New South Wales, for the Year 1918* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1919).

²⁸ R.D. Hay, *Report of the Forestry Department for the Year Ended 30th June, 1916* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1916); 'Report of the Proceedings of the Interstate Conference on Forestry', paper presented at the *Interstate Conference on Forestry* (Brisbane, 1922), 29.

²⁹ 'New South Wales Afforestation: Wealth from Sandhills', 10–11.

³⁰ Pringle, 'Planting Pines by Prison Labour at Tuncurry', 182–3.

³¹ 'Gaol or the Bush', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1926; 'Tuncurry Camp – a Gaol without Walls – Modern Penal System'; S. L. Kessell, *Forestry in New South Wales: A Report on the Indigenous Forests, Plantations and Forest Industries of New South Wales with Recommendations for Future Administration and Practice* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1934), 51–5.

³² B.U. Byles, 'Radiata Site Quality Survey, Tuncurry State Forest No. 283', in *Papers Presented to NSW Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council* (Sydney: 1937), 1.

³³ 'Prison Camp – Abandonment Probable', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1937

³⁴ T.H. Chapman to C.E. Bennett, MLA, 26 October 1937, in 'Tuncurry S. F. No. 283 – Site Quality Survey' (Forestry Commission of NSW, 1937), SRNSW 3/2377.

³⁵ T.H. Chapman to C.E. Bennett, MLA, 26 October 1937.

³⁶ 'Tuncurry Still An Asset', *Truth*, 7 November 1937.

³⁷ 'Tuncurry S. F. No. 283 – Site Quality Survey'; Elva Carmichael, *The History of Tuncurry, Darawank, Failford, Nabitac, Wang Wauk, Coolongolook, Krambach* (Tuncurry, NSW: Great Lakes Historical Society, 2001), 40–1; A.G. Holman, *The History of Tuncurry* (Taree: Northern Champion, 1954), np. One wonders what the children made of a forest of blackened pines.

³⁸ 'Tuncurry Afforestation Camp Entrance and Description Books' (1913–37), SRNSW 5/1092 and 5/1617; 'Tuncurry Afforestation Camp Receptions and Discharges' (1913–37), SRNSW 5/1618; John R. Lee, 'Why I Won't Build Any New Gaols – NSW Prison Camps Are Officially Explained', *Sunday Guardian*, 1 June 1930.

³⁹ 'No More Prisons – Camps More Effective', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 1937.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 2; John Ramsland, *With Just but Relentless Discipline: A Social History of Corrective Services in New South Wales* (Kenthurst, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1996), ch. 7; O'Toole, *The History of Australian Corrections*, 82; J.A. Morony, *The More Things Change: A History of Corrections in New South Wales* (Sydney: J. Morony, 1988), 506; J.M. Powell, 'Arcadia and Back: "Village Settlement" in Victoria, 1894–1913', *Australian Geographical Studies* **11**, 2 (1973): 134, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8470.1973.tb00147.x.