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ANTECEDENTS OF THOMAS MOTT OSBORNE'S "MUTUAL WELFARE LEAGUE" IN MICHIGAN

Harold M. Helfman

The author is a member of the Department of History in the Ohio State University. The present article sets forth the claim that nineteenth century developments in the penal administration of the Detroit House of Correction and the Michigan State Prison are the true origins of the concept of inmate self-government that was popularized by Thomas Mott Osborne's "Mutual Welfare League."—EDITOR.

Penal historians usually give Thomas Mott Osborne credit for first introducing the "new penology" of culture and education as a preparation of criminals for citizenship. The "Mutual Welfare League" at New York's Auburn Prison in 1914, and the system of convict self-government which he later developed at Sing Sing have been represented as the first systematic and comprehensive American attempts to provide an effective procedure of social education for prison inmates.¹ The New York program envisaged a convict democracy expressed through self-governing representative bodies and inmate-imposed rules of discipline. Warden Osborne, in a series of lectures which he delivered in 1916 at Yale University and published in collective form as *Society and Prisons*, traced the genesis of his progressive idea of inmate rule to the George Junior Republic at Freeville, New York, of whose board of trustees he was president for more than fifteen years.² Nowhere within his lectures did Warden Osborne make mention of two Michigan experiments of more than a quarter of a century previous, from which consciously or unconsciously he must have borrowed.

Some time within the 1860's, Zebulon R. Brockway, the "miracle-worker" of the Detroit House of Correction, initiated a plan for self-government among the inmates of that institution. The annual reports of the officers and inspectors of the House of Correction make no mention of this pioneer attempt at reformatory prison management, although Brockway discussed the subject later in his published memoirs.³ No doubt Brockway felt that the civic opinion of the day would brand as sugar-coating and coddling any deviation from the orthodox "watch dog" supervision of incarcerated felons and so made no public utterances at the time on the worthwhileness of his experiments.

The Brockway plan, formulated from the famous experiment

¹ Harry E. Barnes, *The Evolution of Penology in Pennsylvania* (Indianapolis, 1927), p. 365.

² (New Haven, 1916), p. 139.

³ Zebulon R. Brockway, *Fifty Years of Prison Service: An Autobiography* (New York, 1912), pp. 96-97.

at Norfolk Island of the English reform Warden, Alexander Maconochie, called for the assignment of intelligent long-term prisoners to custodial and monitorial duties usually performed by civilian officers. This promotion of inmates to semi-official relations and duties differed from the orthodox use of "trusties" in local jails since the new duties were less servile and the institutional social status of the prisoners thus engaged was more elevated. Warden Brockway had so much confidence in his experiment of engaging prisoners in supervisory capacities that by threatening to turn over the complete mechanical and educational supervision of the House of Correction to the prisoners themselves, he broke a strike of civilian administrators in the late 1860's and forced the officers to relent and to return to their duties. Brockway's resignation in 1871, precipitated by a quarrel with Mayor Hugh Moffatt, aborted this practice of inmate rule at the Detroit House of Correction. No further recognition of the procedure can be found in the official or unofficial records of the Detroit institution for the next quarter of a century, during which time reforms were sacrificed in the endeavor to produce an annual municipal profit.

Brockway's aim of prisoner self-government was carried over and elaborated by the experiments introduced in the late 1880's by Warden Hiram F. Hatch of the Michigan State Prison at Jackson. Michigan's "reform warden" premised his program with the belief that discipline had for its object "the adaptation of character to circumstances, the training to self-command."⁴ His six-year tenure of office at the Jackson prison from 1885-1891 witnessed the transformation of a philosophy of blind indiscriminate punishment to a credo that the amenable delinquent must be fitted for a successful rehabilitation in society. Hatch's brightest achievement was the formation in 1888 of an organization for social betterment among the 457 inmates of the State Prison. A constitution was drawn up by an unsupervised committee of their own number, in which the men named their organization, "The Mutual Aid League of the M. S. P.", a title somewhat similar to Osborne's "Mutual Welfare League" experiment of some twenty-five years later. The lofty aims of the society were stipulated in its constitution:

The objects of this league shall be: by social intercourse to improve ourselves, and to aid in the moral, intellectual, physical and financial advancement of our fellowmen. To inculcate a higher appreciation of the value and sacred obligations of American citizenship, and the necessity of unconditional loyalty to the Federal and State

⁴ *Biennial Report of the Inspectors and Officers of the Michigan State Prison for the Year Closing June 30, 1890* (Lansing, 1890), p. 30.

government, as exemplified by a strict maintenance of the laws by them promulgated. To resist and oppose corruption and dishonesty in all forms and places and to promote honesty and efficiency in the discharge of all labor, tasks and duties assigned. To respect and aid by personal discipline, in the maintenance of all rules and regulations necessary to the discipline and good order of the prison.⁵

Warden Hatch presided over monthly convocations of the society alone without guards. Agreeable to their by-laws, he appointed nine members as an executive board to meet with him weekly, a number and procedure similar to that adopted in the Osborne experiment. Suggestions and opinions made by the representative body of the inmates enabled authorities to keep in constant touch with the sentiments of the prison yard. The membership of "The Mutual Aid League" was expected to assist in starting and keeping the new men right; and in this way many of the convicts interested themselves actively in assisting the administration to preserve good order and in maintaining the beginnings of correctional and reformatory work in the Michigan State Prison.⁶

Considerable contemporary criticism was directed at Hatch's progressive method of prison management. That the Jackson discipline was new and radical was in itself sufficient reason for ridicule. But belittlers of the self-government program claimed that participating inmates were "pampered and coddled to the destruction of good discipline and all deterrent effect."⁷ One prison officer, drawing from his long experience with the "criminal type," even prophesied that Hatch's "reckless proceeding" of holding meetings without guards patrolling the aisles could only result in "the utter demoralization of the prison, if not a destructive outbreak."⁸ Warden Hatch answered these slurs on his administrative techniques by pointing to an unblemished record in the maintenance of prison discipline and by logically noting that if "the principles which underlie them [his ideas] are true, they will survive and will be strengthened by opposition. If they are defective and wrong, they will fail as they ought."⁹

This innovation could have made the Michigan State Prison a leader in national penal correction and inmate reformation, but, unfortunately, it was dropped with the resignation of Hiram F. Hatch on February 3, 1891. So thoroughly did the Jackson institution eradicate traces of "The Mutual Aid

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸ H. H. Hart, "The Reformation of Criminals," as quoted, *ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

League" experiment that a report written in 1899 by Orlando M. Barnes, a member of the board of inspectors of the State Prison, and intended to be a compendium of penal activities at the penitentiary,¹⁰ made no mention of Hatch's attempt at inmate rule. In fact, the pendulum of prison administration in Michigan swung decidedly to the opposite extreme during the decade of the 'nineties, as witnessed by Mr. Barnes' demand for a penal discipline whereby inmates might appreciate the importance of obeying laws by realizing that suffering followed as a natural consequence of rules infractions.¹¹

So completely had Hatch's correctional program faded from the memories of men that when Thomas Mott Osborne formulated his "Mutual Welfare League" some two decades later, all prison administrators hailed this "new" system of inmate self-government as something profoundly radical and untried in institutional management. That Warden Osborne's effort was to be the most sustained and publicized program of prison democracy hitherto attempted in the "new penology" cannot be denied by the present author. What must be challenged is the allegation that the "Mutual Welfare League" was America's pioneer effort in the direction of penal self-government. The similarity in objectives, names, techniques, and organizational structure between the Brockway-Hatch plans in Michigan and the Osborne program in New York indicates to the historian more than a mere coincidence.

¹⁰ *Prison System of Michigan: An Account of the Penal and Penitentiary System and Institutions of the State of Michigan with a Consideration of Improvements* (Lansing, 1899).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.