

with prisoners remaining hooded and silent under strict regimentation. Like the penitentiary in Ushuaia, it stands out against the beauty of the place, but also the wildness of the whole of the Tasman Peninsula and beyond. From here there was no possibility of escape, except to almost certain death in the dangerous icy waters that surround Port Arthur. A few men did get away but most were recaptured. Ushuaia provides exactly the same scenario. One could escape but to where? The wilds of the Patagonian plains and massive Andean glaciers? Or risk stealing a boat and navigating the Beagle Channel into the great wind torn southern ocean. Both Port Arthur and Ushuaia were 'sold' to the general public as places from which escape was impossible, reminiscent of the legendary reputation of "Bagne de Cayenne", otherwise "Devil's Island", off the coast of French Guiana.

Just as the British convicts built both early Hobart and Port Arthur so their Argentinean counterparts, decades later, built the town of Ushuaia. The main resources for building in both cases were bricks and wood. Logging required transportation and railways to and from the penitentiaries were purpose built, that on the Tasman Peninsula to Port Arthur no longer exists, while the one in Ushuaia, twenty-five kilometres in length, is a tourist attraction. However, it proves to be an insightful trip. While snow rarely fell on the Tasman Peninsula, Ushuaia and its surrounds are often deep in drifts. So, as the train climbs up into the hinterland behind the town, the landscape is densely dotted by tree stumps. Depending on the height of the stump it is possible to tell whether or not the tree was felled in summer or winter, the winter stumps being much taller due to the depths of the snow. Thus the landscape becomes a natural "fossilised" witness to the convicts' presence on the land.



The train at the end of the world



Tree stumps, the remains of convict logging.

The densely forested landscape around Port Arthur cannot be 'read' in the same way. The land has been cleared and built on, but the strange ghost like tree stumps of Ushuaia are absent for two reasons: firstly it rarely snows on the Tasman peninsula and secondly

the rate of self generated reforestation is very fast in Tasmania unlike Tierra del Fuego where the vegetation suffers from natural devastation and only regenerates slowly.

How much further can this initial comparison go? Much further, as I found out. In both penitentiaries the men worked in gangs with armed guards and the colours, though not design, of the uniforms were the same: yellow and black, colours which stood out significantly against the landscape through which the convicts moved. American prison uniforms for the same period were blue, white and grey, while British hulk uniforms, when issued, were rust coloured and with red markings. Elsewhere in Britain, for example Millbank prison on the banks of the Thames in London, the uniform was blue, red and grey. The similarity in colour may just be a coincidence and at this particular moment I cannot pursue the matter further. That remains for later research.



Commemoration to the convicts at Ushuaia



Ushuaia: Convict uniform

The vast majority of prisoners in the Ushuaia penitentiary were gaoled for what today we would call minor offences, stealing, forgery and such like, though there were also murderers and military prisoners. Ushuaia was also used to confine political prisoners, as were the penitentiaries in Australia where, for example, many Irish political prisoners ended up along with others from Canada. In both judicial systems death penalties were often commuted to indefinite exile and hard labour. One of the main differences between the two penal systems is that while the convict system in Australia did allow for a basically symbolic salary, for the prisoners in Ushuaia the regime was based on salaried work and primary education for all. At one stage the penitentiary had over thirty different types of skilled labourers who not only served the goal and naval bases but also the needs of Ushuaia itself. Thus the town had, for example, a printer, the first in the territory, telephones, and electric energy. The reason for the difference in penitential regimes and their output is probably due to the fact that Ushuaia was developed at a much later date than that in Australia.

In the case of Australia the convicts came, initially, as part of the British colonial agenda of invasion, while in Argentina the transportation was internal, from the north of the nation to the southernmost tip. In the very early stages of colonisation in Australia both convicts and free settlers were often re/convicted of felonies and thus became internal colonial convicts rather than external. There is an assumption, now fading, that all convicts transported to Australia were British or, as some prefer, Anglo-Celtic a somewhat problematic term itself. Thanks to convict studies researchers across the world, we now know that, while the majority did come from Britain and Ireland, a higher number than one would expect were foreign. Convicts of many nationalities found themselves caught up in the British judicial system and the agenda of empire and were thus summarily transported to the Antipodes. Similarly, in Ushuaia history tells us that the inmates were Argentinean, but a quick look at the list of places of origin and also family names tells us that this was not strictly true.

Many of the names on the only prison roll I saw in Ushuaia are Galician in origin and also Italian. There was nothing on the list to indicate if these people were migrants to the country or had been there for a generation or more. The rest of the lists exist in manuscript, but time made it impossible for me to look at them. However, I am almost certain that on my return I will find that many of the inmates throughout the history of Ushuaia penitentiary were in fact migrants or descendents of migrants, but not necessarily with Argentinean nationality. There was a huge influx of Galicians into Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century onwards and the Italians had migrated there in large numbers over much the same period. At this stage, I can only hypothesise on the presence and judicial position of Galician and Italian migrants in Argentina and, by extension, Ushuaia.

Argentina was invaded and colonised by the Spanish and became part of the Spanish empire. However, the large influx of Galician migrants from the end of the nineteenth century onwards was, almost certainly, due to poverty and the continuous political upheavals in Spain. Galicians who migrated to Australia were often shepherds and small farmers. Others came from the coastal areas and became involved in local fishing industries. At the moment, I can only surmise that the same typology would apply to those who migrated to Argentina. A further point for consideration would be the attraction of migrating to a country with the same language. I suspect that the same paradigm might well apply to the Italian migrants. Argentina offered land, the dream of making it good, and a language which could be relatively easily assimilated. Many Italians settled on existing vineyards as labourers, the luckier ones later going on to run their own or acquired ranches on which they in turn often used migrant Italian labour.

One of the aims of my project will be to attempt to establish a profile regarding the presence of these two groups of migrants in Ushuaia. Only the court records, prison lists and other such material will reveal whether or not these individuals were nationalised Argentineans or retained their nationality of origin. According to most laws any individual, regardless of nationality, who commits a crime within the borders of a country is going to be subject to the local laws or those of empire and dealt with accordingly. The task that remains ahead is multifold. A full study of the legal system at the time in Argentina; of existing court registers and trial summaries followed by a study of each convict and where they came from, their nationality at the time of

conviction and so forth. Only a rigorous study of this nature will actually throw light on the matter of who these Galicians and Italians were and their status within the country.

So what conclusions can be drawn at the end of my field trip into Ushuaia, its surroundings and penitentiary? Why did Payró call his chronicle *La Australia Argentina*? Payró uses the decimation of the Indigenous people of Australia and “los Fueguinos” as points of comparison, together with the way in which Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego were opened up through internal colonisation and the difficulties encountered by the pioneers as a result of the inclemency of both land and climate, especially in the extreme south: “Tierra del Fuego”. Strangely, to my mind at least, the comparison and striking similarities between both convict systems is not dealt with by Payró. The dating of Payró’s work tells us that he did not see the penitentiary in Ushuaia itself, but he could not but have been aware of its predecessor on Faro de San Juan de Salvamento and would have seen the small settlement established as a sub-prefecture on the 12th of October 1884 and as the capital Fueguina in 1885. By the time he was writing *La Australia Argentina*, the role of Tierra del Fuego as the destination for internal convict transportation was being discussed by government officers in high places and members of the public were aware of the future plans for the austral penitentiary. Payró’s silence, however, echoes what I myself found. Ushuaia has a magnificent convict museum, resources and extensive web pages, yet nobody, as yet, has begun to unlock what I believe is a Pandora’s box in convict studies. The Argentinean authorities most certainly followed the Australian model and location for their internal exiles. It is now a question of finding the documents that will not only corroborate, or not, some of my theories but, more intriguingly, reveal the stories and family histories that lie silent within the walls of the Ushuaia penitentiary.

References

- ¹ The English title is my translation
 - ² <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/FichaObra.html?portal=24&Ref=4742> First accessed 21st August 2007, re-accessed several times since then.
 - ³ <http://tierradelfuego.org.ar/museo/virtual.htm> First accessed 21st August 2007, re-accessed several times since then. *La Nación* is an old well established Argentinean newspaper still in print.
 - ⁴ http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles_darwin/voyage_of_beagle/Chapter10.html accessed 2/10/2007
 - ⁵ http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles_darwin/voyage_of_beagle/Chapter10.html accessed 10/10/2007. The text is also available from Project Gutenberg
 - ⁶ I have been unable at this juncture to verify if this was actually the case.
 - ⁷ This was a story that was constantly repeated to us by various people.
- Photographs Copyright Sue Ballyn

Works Cited

- Vairo, Carlos Pedro (1998) *El Presidio – The Prison. Una Colección Fotográfica – A photo Collection*. Las Lajas: Zagier & Urruty Publications.
- _____ (2005) *El Presidio de Ushuaia Vol.2* Las Lajas: Zagier & Urruty Publications.