

Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand

Jared Davidson

The following is a transcript of a talk given by Jared Davidson about an aspect of his recent book, *Blood and Dirt: Prison Labour and the Making of New Zealand* (Bridget Williams Books, 2023). The presentation was part of the Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage's Public History Talk series at the National Library on 4 October 2023. It was followed by questions from the audience.

Neill Atkinson, Chief Historian, Ministry for Culture and Heritage:

Nau mai harae mai ki te kaupapa o te ra nei. Welcome everyone. I'm Neil Atkinson, Chief Historian at the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. Welcome to the National Library. So today, it's my great privilege to introduce Jared Davison, who described himself as an archivist by day and author by night. He's an award winning writer based in lower Hutt, and is currently the Research Librarian Manuscripts at the Alexander Turnbull Library here. *Blood and Dirt*, which he will be talking about today is his fifth book, and his earlier books include a very good history of First World War censorship, *Dead Letters*. And so today, Jared is talking to talk to us about the largely neglected history of prison labour across New Zealand, New Zealand's urban and rural landscapes and into the Pacific. And to show how this this unfree work was essential to colonization. And he'll also look at the challenges of researching history from the bottom up. So please join me in inviting Jared to come up and speak to us.

Introduction

Thank you. Kia ora everyone. Nga mihi nui kia koutou. Thanks for coming along today and joining online as well. I just want to start by acknowledging MCH [Ministry for Culture and Heritage] - I received one of their research grants which was really awesome and helped me do the research for this book because as Neill said, I am an archivist by the day, so sometimes finding time to do my own work is hard. And I just want to also acknowledge the National Library / Turnbull staff in the booth and online and everyone who's made the talk a thing today.

I want to begin with one of my favourite pastimes: reading Government reports. No, seriously. The online versions of the AtoJs were a vital source of information when researching *Blood and Dirt* – from statistics and photographs to the agency of imprisoned workers. These reports were often the key that unlocked deeper stories, stories only hinted at in official prose. They can also be quite funny (in a dark kind of way). Take this Wellington example: “I regret to report that when visiting the carpenter’s shop on the 20th November 1908, a prisoner stabbed me in the neck with a chisel.” Or in 1878, when a Committee Chairman asked about Wellington escapes: “Have you had any attempts at escape?—I believe there was one this morning. Just before I came away I heard that a man, under sentence of four years' penal servitude, had escaped from the works at the new hospital, but had been recaptured.” This was Wellington Hospital in Newtown, built by prisoners using prison-made bricks.

Sometimes the reports revealed collective action taken by prisoners. As I was reading the Prisons Branch report for 1886, I noticed the entry on Dunedin prison offenses included a group. Seventeen men, initials only, had been guilty of gross misconduct, insubordination, hooting and groaning, and subverting the peace. There was a vague mention of mutiny, an insinuation that something big had happened on a prison hulk near Otago Heads. I had to find out more.

So, I turned to the archives. The records of the Prisons Branch for this period are not catalogued – to find an individual file, a researcher has to dive into the bound indexes, follow the nineteenth century scrawl across various registers and then hope your request surfaces gold. In this case, it did. Across pages of looping script, a memo not only names the prisoners involved, it outlined the warder's view of what happened that April morning.

The hulk *Sarah and Esther* was declared a prison in December 1874. It wasn't the first prison hulk in New Zealand – Māori captives had been confined to unseaworthy ships during the 1860s. But the *Sarah and Esther* was a labourer's ship, a floating factory for imprisoned seamen and other convicts. As well as relieving the overcrowded Dunedin Gaol, it was used for roadmaking and other public works around Otago Harbour. Weather permitting, prisoners rose from two-tiered bunks on the lower deck, climbed a narrow gangway with an iron hatch and left the moored hulk in small boats. Through sea spray and lapping tides, an advance party cut along the harbour at sea level while the men behind pitched and metalled the road. When a decent stretch was done, the hulk raised anchor and moved on. Roads on both sides of Otago Harbour were made in this way.

By 1884, the prison hulk was moored at Otago Heads so that prisoners could build the Aramoana mole. Disgorged from the aging hulk, the prisoners quarried stone, filled their carts and then hauled the rock along a 1,200-metre railway line that stretched seaward. Under the watchful eye of armed warders, they dumped the rock into the sea and repeated the process again and again, until they retired to the hulk for the night. Or, until they refused.

On 9 April 1885, forty prisoners refused to work when a prisoner claiming to be sick was rough-handled into a cabin for insolence. Called to fall in by tense and severely outnumbered warders, most of the men complied reluctantly, but seventeen refused and were sent below, jeering at the others for their cowardice. As the published report shows, the seventeen were punished. And their action had an impact on the prison regimes that followed. The strike, coupled with the Otago Harbour Board's attempt to cut the agreed rate for prison labour by half, led to the removal of prisoners from Aramoana Mole in 1886. The unemployed finished what the unfree had started.

Key arguments

The strike and its archival traces is a good example of both history from below, and some of the key arguments I make in *Blood and Dirt*. That is, the crucial role of prisoners in creating public infrastructure; how the extra-human environment played an important part in where and how prisoners worked; that prisoners were a working-class formation and participants in class struggle; that the line between free and unfree, work and punishment, was blurry at best; and that prisons mobilise as much as they confine. The hulk example also shows how pulling at the smallest of threads can unravel a much larger story. For as one reviewer said of *Blood and Dirt*, the struggles of everyday people are not "irrelevant, not a distraction from or mere illustration of statistics and timelines. They are the very marrow of history."

For the rest of the talk, I'll be looking at these arguments in more detail, starting with the most important: that prison labour was not marginal but core to the colonisation of New Zealand and its Pacific Empire.

There are a lot of books on the development of New Zealand's prison system. However, much of it concerns prison administration, penal reform or gender. The unfree work of prisoners outside of the gaol, and in turn the role of unfreedom in the development of colonial infrastructure and environmental transformation, is undertheorized (the notable exception being the work of Wellington geographer Christine McCarthy). Yet prison labour was not an anomaly. Despite its absence in New Zealand historiographies, unfree labour was crucial to colonisation, stamping an indelible mark on the social and material development of the colony. It may be a hidden history, but prison labour is deeply connected with the flow of people and profit through the modern-day city or port.

For the colonial state and its prisons, the insatiable need for labour was the overriding imperative. 'There was too much to be done on the frontier fringes to think of leaving untapped labour behind some hastily erected fences,' wrote the historian Robert Burnett. New Zealand's commodity frontier needed forced labour as much as Britain's other colonies. It wasn't slave labour or bonded labour from abroad. Instead, the incarcerated shuffled out of gaol, were harried onto hulks or ferried by rail to a range of workscapes.

Roadmaking was paramount in the early years, and from 1840 onwards, male chain gangs were used to construct and repair roads in every major urban centre, including the first highways through the North Island's Central Plateau. When prisoners completed the Spiral Road at Raurimu in 1926, they made it possible to drive from Auckland to Wellington for the very first time. By 1934, over 115 kilometres of highway through the Central Plateau was maintained by prison labour, including roads to the Chateau Tongariro – itself built by prisoners. So many of our streets are founded on forced labour that when I started a database of them all, I promptly gave up.

Prison labour was also used on a range of public works, including clearing and levelling hills, reclaiming harbours and constructing moles, jetties and seawalls, draining swamps, diverting waterways, building bridges and retaining walls, creating foundations for schools and universities, and maintaining cemeteries, reserves and botanical gardens. The swamp that became Wellington's Basin Reserve was drained by prisoners, as was the estuary that is now home to Invercargill Airport. It's hard for me to choose examples as there are so many – prison labour is literally beneath our feet and before our very eyes.

Prisoners were also used to build their own enclosures – prisons – as well government buildings such as hospitals, asylums, police stations and even the bricks of the Public Trust Office and Parliament House. And in times of war and peace, unfree labour contributed to the colony's military and state power. Māori captives from the New Zealand Wars were shipped across the country and put to work, including Wellington, Dunedin, Lyttelton, Hokitika and the Chatham Islands. Prisoners also maintained rifle ranges and built massive harbour fortifications. According to Heritage New Zealand, prisoner-made forts in Auckland, Wellington, Lyttelton and Dunedin are 'tangible evidence of New Zealand's step towards independence from the British Crown' and its defence of sovereignty. They also saved the state a lot of money: 'If it were not for prison labour being available,' argued the head of prisons Arthur Hume, 'the works would have been a great drain on revenue.'

By 1901, imprisoned workers were being used to forge state forest plantations. Spurred by fears of a timber shortage and complaints from waged workers about prisoners taking jobs from 'honest, industrious men', the incarcerated were siphoned out of city jails and into prison camps. Their handiwork transformed tussock into trees. Waiotapu, Whakarewarewa, Waipa, Kaingaroa and Tongariro-Rangipō in the North Island and Hanmer and Dumfries in the South were all created with prison labour. By 1921, prisoners had planted 15,932 acres with over 40 million trees and raised a multi-billion-dollar industry in the process.

As prison forests gave way to prison farms, agricultural labour became the mainstay of New Zealand prisons during the twentieth century. By 1923, 70 per cent of the country's prisoners were employed in farm work, including clearing and opening land for settlement, planting crops, testing fertilisers and topdressing, and sharing agricultural knowledge in various journals. Instead of planting trees, prisoners helped to forge dairy farms and the country's Grasslands Revolution.

That revolution, likened by one writer as 'a magic hat which, while still retaining its original size, allowed the conjurer to draw a seemingly never-ending stream of objects from its interior', included the interior of Nauru and Banaba. Literally. Thanks to New Zealand's share in the British Phosphate Commission and its control of these islands, the superphosphate mined there became a staple of kiwi farming. Prison labour in Nauru, Banaba and other parts of New Zealand's Pacific was key to the development of empire on the cheap. The administrations of Cook Islands, Niue and Sāmoa all benefited from forced labour. And in the 1920s, Pacific Islanders were shipped to New Zealand itself and put to work on prison farms, a perfect storm of empire.

The extra-human environment was not a bit player but an active protagonist

This fusion of law, geography and the more-than-human world brings us to my second argument: that the extra-human environment was not a bit player but an active protagonist in the history of prison labour. We've seen how Otago Harbour and the sea shaped Otago prison regimes. The ocean and its flows directed unfree labour towards seawalls, moles, harbours, esplanades, coral reefs, swamps and other waterlogged workscapes. With 'wet feet and draggled moleskins', prisoners battled seas at Rock's Road in Nelson, built Gladstone Pier at Port Lyttelton, blasted coral in the Cook Islands, plied their pickaxes for Napier's Marine Parade, and converted water into waves of grass at Invercargill's New River Estuary.

Water played a major role at Milford Sound Prison too. Sent to construct a road from Milford Sound to Lake Te Anau in 1890, horrendous weather ruined food, slowed progress and fostered discontent. A shocking 29 cm of rain fell on one day alone, and floodwaters rose so high in April 1891 they lapped at the kitchen door. Rain had stopped prisoners from working a full 150 days that year, and while a kilometre of track had been turned into road, one sarcastic reporter claimed the road would 'be entirely completed for horse and other traffic on the 3rd of February 2500 A.D.' The prison was officially closed on 10 September 1892, but left a sculpted track that now relieves hikers at Sandfly Point.

Prison forests were even more subject to the forces of extra-human nature. Fire, frost and rain were common to them all, as was the agency of animals like deer, rabbits and birds. However, some of the prison forests were utterly unique: workscapes that were created from volcanic ash; workscapes that brought snow or extreme drought, earthquakes and boiling mud; workscapes that shaped the actions of both the incarcerated and the state. Sometimes the extra-human environment fostered success. Sometimes it sowed discord and failure. When it came to felons among the firs, the extra-human environment was as much of a protagonist as people.

Ocean swells and hurricanes, invasive weeds and copra beetles, destructive deer and rampant rabbits – the more-than-human world influenced human forces of interpersonal domination and resistance. It's in this sense that relations between people 'are always bundled with the rest of nature, flowing inside, outside, and through human bodies and histories.' As Jason W. Moore writes, 'Nature is an active participant in every labour process: the web of life, both visible and invisible to humans, is always at work.' As the state channelled seas, soil and forced labour into national assets, it not only acted upon nature, but *within* and *through* it.

Prisoners were workers and should be seen as a key working-class formation

The third argument of the book is that prisoners were a key working-class formation. I didn't realise it until I began this book, but despite being a labour historian I had a massive blind spot when it came to prisoners. The chain gang as a working-class formation was missing from my conception of labour and its histories. It's as if prisoners ceased to be workers behind bars—as if a curtain had been drawn along the prison's stone walls.

Yet prisoners were overwhelmingly working class in the nineteenth century, swept up by the same mobilising forces of dispossession and coercion as other workers. With their working-class backgrounds, gang-based labour and collective experience of precarity, prisoners need to be included in the ranks of labour. They were like other pools of workers in the nineteenth century, workers who shared similar experiences, rituals and subcultures.

Take the idea of ‘the progress industry’ coined by historian James Belich. In *Making Peoples* Belich wrote about the floating crews of workers who were essential to colonisation – the seamen, soldiers, navvies, sawyers and bushmen, gold miners, flax millers, shearers and other farmhands whose work in gangs literally made New Zealand. But we need to add another crew of workers to that list: the chain gang. In fact, the chain gang was a crucial cog of the progress industry: public works that attacked the Indigenous environment and paved the way for Pākehā settlement. And like other gangs of workers, prisoners experienced class antagonism and drew upon forms of working-class resistance – from escapes and go-slows to sabotage and strikes.

There are comic examples of escape in the book. One of my favourites is the seamen in Lyttelton who walked off with the town’s first lockup. As the gaoler returned from an errand he was ‘amazed to see the gaol walking down to meet him. The men had punched holes through the floor for their legs, had picked the whole structure up and were carrying it down to their ship.’ Or the prisoner at Hanmer Springs who stole his warder’s bike and cycled to freedom (he was ‘an expert rider’, reported the newspapers). Or the prisoner at Rocks Road in Nelson who cried ‘shark!’ and bolted as the guards peered over the seawall.

I don’t mean to make light of imprisonment. As the book shows, prison labour and the spaces we take for granted today was premised on violence. And like the example of the *Sarah and Esther* strike, conflict could be industrial in scale. In July 1863, when 82 prisoners in Dunedin’s gaol refused work, the ringleaders were flogged or put in solitary confinement. In May 1881, Lyttelton Gaol was shut down by the strike of eighty prisoners upset at changes introduced by Inspector of Prisons Arthur Hume. At Waiotapu Prison Plantation in August 1904, 22 prisoners went on strike over their hours of work. After refusing to work for two days, the prisoners won a change in their hours. At Hanmer Springs Prison in January 1905, prisoners struck after their smoko was shortened.

Here were strikes during a period most labour historians have considered strike-free. And not only that: some of these strikes were successful.

Prisoners also launched sympathy strikes across multiple jails. In June 1911, prisoners at Dunedin’s Fort Taiaroa refused work in solidarity with Wellington prisoners, 28 of whom had gone on strike at Point Halswell. The most vocal prisoners were punished with solitary confinement and then removed from the fort. But echoes of prisoner solidarity resurfaced in 1912, when strikes rocked Lyttelton Gaol in April and evidence of a union-like prison league was uncovered at Mount Eden. These events reflected the wider working-class militancy of the pre-war period, of which prisoners were a part.

Women prisoners were also a key working-class formation in the nineteenth century. Class hierarchies built upon gender helped to mobilise certain bodies for certain roles. Indeed, the public work of the chain gang was impossible without the domestic work of incarcerated women, who were confined indoors and given the dreary work of washing, mending and making, cleaning, sweeping and scrubbing. By the 1880s the clothing of both prisoners and officers across the country was being made by women inmates. They mended socks, sewed shirts, crafted cardigans and stitched underwear; when these came back soiled, they washed them. After the first separate prison for women opened in Addington in 1913, it took in the laundry of other government institutions.

As Bronwyn Dalley writes, women's industrial-scale prison labour was heavy, menial and highly punitive, designed to return women to the feminine sphere. Class, gender and prison labour were inseparable, and felt keenly by the imprisoned workers forced to make streets and socks, moles and moleskins, bricks and boots. To borrow the words of historian Peter Linebaugh, these were the men and women of the *making* class. And in the process, they blurred the lines between productive labour and punishment.

Free and unfree labour do not exist in separate worlds but are part of a continuum of coercion

Which leads to my next point, that free and unfree labour do not exist in separate worlds but are part of a continuum of coercion.

In the nineteenth century the line between free and unfree, waged and unwaged, was tenuous. As Jairus Banaji argues in 'The Fictions of Free Labour', all wage labour is subject to coercion, such as having to sell one's labour to survive or doing what the boss says to get paid. This coercion springs from the property relations of capitalism, 'a set of legal rights, privileges and powers that place one person in a position to force another person to choose between labour and some more disagreeable alternative.'

So-called 'free' and forced labour don't exist in separate worlds, argues the historian Robert Steinfeld: 'It is more accurate to think about labour relations in terms of degrees of coercive pressure that can be brought to bear to elicit labour.' Workers of all stripes could withhold their labour—be it on a ship, a shop or in prison, and faced economic and extra-economic punishment if they did. The consequences may have been harsher for prisoners, but that doesn't mean free labour was voluntary or free of consequence. Both involved a choice between disagreeable alternatives, and both were pervasively shaped by law.

The working experience of seamen is a case in point. Because of a ship's articles, the fixed-term employment contracts that bound seamen to the ship's master or owner, workplace resistance met swift retribution onboard, including violence, manacles and confinement. Once they reached port, refractory seamen were imprisoned with hard labour. As a result, sailors found themselves moving from crew to the chain gang and back again – in fact, seamen made up a fifth of the country's prison population between 1860 and 1864. In major ports like Dunedin and Lyttelton, it was often more like half. Their onboard experience, coupled with their regular imprisonment, complicates tidy divisions between free and unfree.

Another blurring of the free/unfree binary was the use of prisons as labour clearing houses. As Neill Atkinson writes in his book *Crew Culture*, captains and local merchants, fearing their crew would jump ship, favoured imprisonment due to the difficulty of finding replacements and the potential for costly delays. A crew's stint at hard labour often matched the time needed for a ship to refit and make ready to sail: indeed, a rider added to the terms of a seaman's sentence allowed captains to collect his imprisoned crew from the jail when he needed them. Faced with coercion on and off the ship, these maritime examples show how nineteenth century labour was fluid rather than fixed.

Prison labour in New Zealand's Pacific is another example of this fluidity. Indentured labourers in Sāmoa and the phosphate-producing islands of Nauru and Banaba were subject to strict supervision. Punishment and routine violence were rife, and the worst offenders were sentenced to hard labour or had an extra year's work added to their contract. In Nauru, Chinese and Pacific Islanders lived in segregated camps that closely resembled prisons. Divided into wings, each surrounded by a 2-metre-high barbed-wire fence, workers trudged out of their compounds through gates that could be locked during moments of worker unrest. In the Pacific, forced labour was the natural extension of indentured contracts already marked by a degree of unfreedom.

Prisons mobilise as much as they confine

Hopefully these examples illustrate how important prisons and their unfree work regimes have been to capitalism and the making of New Zealand. Which leads to my final point: that prisons mobilise as much as they confine.

As my research progressed, I realised that asking questions about *where* yields remarkable insights to the question of *why*. Looking to spaces beyond the prison's walls helped me to understand incarceration as a much wider phenomenon, one that arose in a specific set of circumstances yet continues to impact on almost all aspects of daily life.

The way I tackle this in the book is through the idea of improvement. Today, when we think of improvement we usually think of gradual betterment – of making something better. Its original meaning was very different and points to the dialectical nature of capitalism and prisons. Both were deeply concerned with the inverse of improvement: idleness. Rooted in the Germanic word for worthless, to be idle is to squander something that could be turning a profit, while 'improvement' meant to do something for profit, especially to make profit from land. As Brenna Bhandar writes, improvement 'produced and reflected new conceptions of value in relation to land, goods, commodities, and the value of human life.'

This imperative to create and constantly improve property is evidenced in the colonial attack on waste and idleness. In nineteenth-century New Zealand, so-called unimproved spaces were simultaneously landscapes of wasted potential and pregnant with the possibility of profit. At the same time, 'idleness in prison meant waste', and according to the criminologist John Pratt, 'waste, in this early colonial society, was more criminal than crime itself.' Heightened by labour shortages, inadequate and overcrowded gaols, and a prohibition on importing convicts set by the Colonial Office, the New Zealand state mobilised its prison population onto a range of public works.

The idea of improvement continues today. Writing of its modern-day forestry schemes, the Department of Corrections aims 'to improve the employment potential of the people who pass through our prisons each year.' The imperatives of improvement cast a long shadow.

Blood and Dirt contains countless examples of prisons mobilising its inmates. Yet carceral spaces affect more than just the people within them. They also shape the wider world of work and power. As Marc Neocleous writes, prisons don't just confine the working-class, they mobilised them in order to offer their labour power for sale on the market. Their mobilizing work was the mobilization of work.

Conclusion

So, to sum up. Prisons and their unfree work regimes were part of capital's quest to bring unruly bodies and the land itself to order – to transform and 'improve' Indigenous space. As Clare Anderson, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and others note, 'by appreciating the importance of convicts for expansion and colonization,' the history of punishment 'was not so much characterized by a developing immobilization of prisoners within the walls of jails but by their ongoing geographical mobilization as forced labour.'

This forced labour forms an invisible layer of memory upon the landscape, the residue of practices that adapted to the uniqueness of New Zealand's Pacific, and in turn transformed it. Yet if much of our landscape is an archive of forced work, why isn't the history of prison labour and its carceral spaces more widely known?

Perhaps the myth of New Zealand exceptionalism and convict Australia have overshadowed the story of prison labour here. For Charlotte Macdonald, such 'historical amnesia' is the product of a selective heritage, one that is characteristic of societies built upon dispossession, coercion and violence. Either way, ignoring the role of unfree labour in New Zealand has created a skewed picture of our past. *Blood and Dirt* is my attempt at correcting the frame. As a history from below, it is a story that focuses on work outside of the prison and the people doing that work, rather than a history of prison policy and its administrators. That's because the recovery of voices missing from the historical narrative is a central purpose of history from below.

This is easier said than done, however. Even though prisoners were constantly measured, managed, surveilled and recorded by the state, prisoners themselves have left very few accounts of their working experience. Photographs of prisoners at work are also rare. Yet sometimes it was possible to bring prisoners out from the edge of the frame and into the centre. And perhaps the biggest lesson I've learned from writing this book is that history from the bottom up truly means from the bottom up, from the land and sea, from grasses to geothermal activity. It means tuning in to place, to the extra-human environment and the web of life we inhabit. The landscape around us is an archive, full of more-than-human histories that co-create our stories.

I hope that by looking beyond the prison's walls to the prison workscapes we now take for granted, *Blood and Dirt* shows how unfree work regimes were not only important in our past but crucial to our present, and how imprisoned workers have played an active role in the making of modern New Zealand. It turns out the imprint left by the incarcerated is all around us. We just need to know where to look. Kia ora Thank you.

Question time:

Audience member question: Hi Jared, thanks very much. That's really interesting. I have two questions. One, you were talking about them being basically working class being over represented in prisons. My first question is there any evidence of, of people who committed more sort of white collar crimes like embezzlement and so on them being subjected to the same type of labour that the working class was subjected to?

And another question that I had, I noticed that some of the guys that are carrying arms and you said that the guards were armed, and I don't know, when like, obviously, as far as I'm aware, anyway, in prisons today, the guards are not armed although they may have access to weapons, I'm not sure. But is there any evidence of them ever using those weapons on prisoners?

Jared: Yeah, thank you. So the first question, white collar crime, embezzlement, fraud detectors, they were kept in, or tried to be kept, in separate confinement from the common criminals and didn't have to do hard labour. So sentences either had a hard labour component, or didn't. And overwhelmingly, those types of crimes did not receive hard labour, except in the Pacific. We had some debtors actually doing hard labour and they complained about it because that would not have happened in New Zealand. So yeah, it was was and still is, I would arguably say, a very class based system. The second question, yep - they were definitely armed. Escapees were shot on and killed. There's countless examples of people who were killed. A Prisoner working at Molesworth Street just across the road from New World, the corner where the ACC buildings. He was shot and killed accidentally when a warder bumped his gun into a hoarding and it went through his head. He was a sailor from Germany. So yeah, used all the time. But as kind of prison gangs started get phased out in the 1890s. The prisoners were still marching around Wellington streets until 1915. And armed guards up until that time was very common. But yeah, tended to get phased out around that time. I'm not sure about the current day situation.

Audience member question: Thank you. Could you explain a little more about your comments about the sailors in the chain gangs? Did they actually have to do anything wrong? Or was it just part of their sort of employment that they came to port went to the chain gang?

Jared: No, so sailors who resisted terrible working conditions, who wanted to jump ship or abscond or desert were all punished with hard labour. A lot of sailors helped themselves to cargo. So the the word perk comes from perquisites. And in the moral economy before capitalism, as a worker, you're allowed to that stuff. So you have customs being criminalized over time. And so yeah, they essentially if they played up or resisted their working conditions or disagreed with the captain who had a lot of power then they ended up often closer to port ended up in the chain gang.

Audience member question: Kia ora Jared. I was just wondering. So you sort of mentioned on one hand how a lot of prisoners were involved with draining of swamps and wetlands, etc. But you also mentioned how a lot of prisoners were involved with the agricultural industry. What sort of intersections were between there because I know that particularly where I grew up in the Eastern Bay, there are a lot of swampland strained for agriculture.

Jared: Prison, prison labour and prisons really did revolve around, except for some camps, nearby prison. So they weren't necessarily marched out all across different rural areas unless there was a prison or a project in place. So the main one being Invercargill, they drained, basically, about 1500 worth of football fields at Waihopai Estuary. And that became really Southland's most valuable farming grass, and it's now Invercargill airport. So it was a lot of draining was to do with inner city or kind of close to prisons. They weren't necessarily everywhere. But that's that blurry nature between free and unfree labour, because you could have someone who would be in prison, leave prison and very next day get a very similar labouring job of doing that swamp draining, you know, the very next day. So that was interesting to me.

Question, read by member of staff: Thank you, Jared. I have a question from our online audience. 'Thank you for this enlightening talk. Do you think we could do more to increase the visibility of our history, for example, through interpretation panels at key sites, like Pukeahu.'

Jared: Yeah. And in the prologue of the book, I wonder why there aren't more memorials or like an app. But then, if we did have memorials to prison labour, they would be everywhere. You know, like, literally from Mount Ruapehu to the sea. They've been everywhere. But there are some around like, Hamner Forest does have a heritage panel. And it mentioned some prisoners and I think Rangitoto mentions the prisoners, Milford Sound Track, is starting to acknowledge the prison there. But yeah, I definitely think it would be good to see more of that heritage. But as we know, even like important subjects, such as the New Zealand Wars are still catching up in having appropriate memorials and markers. So yeah, we'll see. But yeah, it'd be interesting to take that up.

Audience member question: Kai ora Jared, that was that was absolutely fascinating. What I was wondering about is what was the commercial relationship between the prison and the local authorities? I mean, presumably, a lot of these things were done for local authorities. Was there an exchange of money? Or was it just an assumption that prison labour was free labour.

Jared: It changes over time and different periods. So because of the provincial government scheme we had in New Zealand in the 1850s to the 1870s, provincial governments could determine the rate of pay where prisoners worked, and they often work with local councils and local bodies, and they often were charged out so the prisons did get a small fee for the prison labour but prisoners were not paid until about the 1910s-20s There aren't a lot of links to commercial entities, a lot of the quarrying and the gravel and all the timber did in, you know, mines like the Waihi Gold Mining company, or roading contractors could come and buy gravel from Mount Eden Prison and use it. In the Pacific, however, the New Zealand Administration leased out convicts to planters or sent them to plantations. So there was a lot more blurring then, and then Fletcher's that built the Chateau Tongariro did use prison labour, but yeah, essentially it was very limited to government and local bodies.

Audience member question: Kia ora Jared, I was just wondering if you could explain a little bit about the free and unfree like, that language is new to me.

Jared: Yeah, I don't want to get too Marxist. But basically, in that historiography, it's often set up as unfree being slavery or, you know, work that maybe isn't remunerated or it's basically unfree work right through to kind of indentured labour, and free being the idea that you and I can go off and we're free to sell our labour power to our bosses, and we're free to move around. And so that's a kind of general distinction. And it used to be the idea that like, capitalism only worked, and that free labour through the exploitation of workers labour in the market, and that kind of the dole economic compulsion to get up and go to work every day is what drives capitalism. But actually a lot of scholarship, as we're seeing, has shown that actually extra human or extra economic coercion, violence, slavery, racialized regimes of work, gender, all plays into how capitalism reproduces itself. So yeah, the book just kind of piggybacks on some of that research that is saying, it's not as clear cut as free: you get paid a wage, unfree: you don't get paid. Thank you everyone.

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