

HUMAN RIGHTS IN A PRISON LIBRARY – THE LEGACY OF ALEXANDER MACONOCHIE

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Abstract:

In 1840, Alexander Maconochie became the Governor of Norfolk Island, an island prison where convicts were treated with brutality and considered to be lost causes. Maconochie's objective was to restore dignity to prisoners. He was able to achieve great success in prisoner rehabilitation with policies which were well in advance of their time, but he was undermined and his ideas largely ignored and forgotten. The belief that there was no point in punishment without terror held sway until Maconochie's ideas were readopted as the basis of modern penal systems over a century later.

Canberra's prison, officially opened in 2008, was named in Maconochie's honour. It was the first prison in Australia to be purpose-built to meet human rights obligations.

This paper will look at Maconochie's treatment of convicts as a starting point. It will then focus on human rights at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), specifically within the prison library, using the document Human Rights Principles for ACT Correctional Centres, published by the ACT Government in 2019.

The AMC Library, of which I am the librarian, is a unique and very special place to work. Unique, as one of the few prison libraries in Australia which is both well-resourced and staffed by a full-time professional librarian, but also unique because the AMC is the sole prison for our small jurisdiction. It caters for a range of detainees who would be housed in separate prisons in larger jurisdictions.

As a librarian, I don't usually think in terms of providing a service in accordance with human rights, but that is in fact what I do. The Library addresses human rights in various ways and I will discuss these systematically using the Human Rights Principles for ACT Correctional Centres. While many aspects of the AMC Library are similar to other libraries, in particular public libraries, it more fundamentally needs to address human rights because detainees cannot access resources available elsewhere in the wider society. The library is a source of many important resources for detainees. Aspects I will discuss include obvious ones such as purposeful activity, education and rehabilitation but less obvious ones include detainee safety, maintaining family connections and mental health. There is also the broad need for respect and dignity, which one would think is easy to address, but can at times be a difficult one with detainees.

Finally, the paper examines ways in which the AMC library and importantly, prison libraries elsewhere, fall short in terms of human rights. Sometimes these are matters beyond the control of the librarian, and even prison management, but there is always more that can and should be done.