



Henry Monson

Henry Monson was a founding settler of Dunedin, and its first full-time gaoler. Born in Yorkshire on August 25 1793, he set up in business as a builder and carpenter in London in the 1820s. A devoted Methodist, he also worked to help with slum children in the Ragged Schools. In 1847 he went bankrupt, and, although he was then too old to meet the criteria, his neighbour, Charles Babbage, helped him to obtain assisted passage to Otago. He arrived at Port Chalmers on the *John Wickliffe* in 1848, with two of his sons, William Henry and John Robert. His wife Ann remained in London to settle their business affairs. She was expected to join him in 1856, but for unknown reasons never arrived.

On September 1 1851 Monson was appointed keeper of Dunedin's new gaol. The gaol was one of the first buildings to exist on the edge of the harbour, a dismal and primitive building, approximately 21 by 15 feet, with a tiny yard, set at the tip of Bell Hill, on the narrow headland of Nga-moana-e-rua. The regular inmates were insubordinate sailors, petty thieves, drunks, debtors, and, occasionally, 'lunatics' for want of any alternative accommodation for them. It was hardly a secure facility, and Monson was to report to a judicial inquiry that he was "compelled to treat his prisoners well to prevail on them to remain". He allowed his charges to collect their own rations, and to exercise outside the inadequate yard space. On one notable occasion he allowed them all an outing to the races, instructing them to keep together, remain sober and return by 5.30. All returned on time, only two inebriated. The

inmates also provided much of the labour for the demolition of Bell Hill, and were responsible for the manufacture of the battery charges used in the blasting.

Monson's administration was liberal and based on his Christian principles. He wrote that "a Criminal of any "Class" cannot be improved by any mode of severity; he may, and generally will be, by an enlightened spirit of humanity..." Although this view was opposed by his superiors, a delegation of Visiting Judges in 1855 found that "Mr. Monson ... appears to have stood nearly alone in all efforts hitherto to improve the moral status of the prisoners... It is but just a tribute of praise to say that... his system of "moral suasion" coupled with firmness appears to have succeeded ..."

His most celebrated prisoner was Superintendent James Macandrew, arrested for debt in 1861. After only six hours of gaol conditions Macandrew, in his official capacity, declared his own house a gaol of the province of Otago and took himself home under escort. Monson was outraged at this, but an appeal to the Governor saw Macandrew returned to the Dunedin gaol two months later.

Monson retired from his post on November 15 1861. He died five years later, on December 9 1866, aged 73, while visiting a friend at Maungatua. His grave in the West Taieri Cemetery is marked with a simple headstone bearing his name and dates.

Prepared for the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand
(www.cemeteries.org.nz) by Helen Gilmore.

Sources: www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz; www.dnzb.govt.nz

The History of Otago by A.H.McLintock; "A Goodly Heritage" by H.F.Gilmore