All prison cognoscenti are in debt to the ACA (American Correctional Association) for its publication--a decade ago--of *The American Prison: From the Beginning... A Pictorial History*. This book is a monumental compendium of text and photographs arranged under topical headings. The visual impression is cumulatively overwhelming. If one picture is valued at a thousand words, what of a thousand pictures? [1]-- worth a thousand words each? The experience takes time--and several sittings--to digest. And it is truly affecting.

There is a great deal in this book that is depressing and heart rendering, and a great deal that is shocking. We are reminded time and again of mankind's capacity for unspeakable callousness and cruelty in the name of justice or some other abused lofty construction. We can console ourselves, of course, with the illusion that what is clearly very cruel was the work of our primitive ancestors, and that we now know better, and can do better. This sentiment is reflected on the last page of *The American Prison*, which reads:

Finally, in the years to come, it is hoped that, spurred on by greater understanding, citizens will direct a new generation of correctional workers to create more positive chapters in corrections’ history. For the harm done through their wrongdoings, offenders are responsible. But, for using inappropriate methods for treating offenders, when better methods are known, we are all guilty (p.261).

We can also falsely assume that nothing that we could approve of, or that we could emulate, could have occurred in the shameful past, when penologists were, by definition, unenlightened. There are pictures that can disabuse us of this self-serving view, if we hold it. One such picture (p. 82) shows us a prisoner[end page 37] regiment on parade in Elmira, in the 1880s. Another (p. 129) shows members of the Mutual Welfare League chapter at Auburn taking a vote in 1914. There is a picture (p. 171) of a nursery in a women's reformatory of 1904, and one (p. 172) of reformatory inmates happily feeding chickens. There are pictures of Gil's Norfolk prison colony (p. 199), and of the Vienna Correctional Center (p. 217).

If there is one quibble, there are too many views of buildings, from every conceivable angle. Prison architecture aficionados will find the book indispensable, but the rest of us know that walls do not a prison make, and that it is the human environment of the prison that matters to the inmates, and to staff. In this connection, the image that lingers is that of two death row prisoners (p. 191) playing checkers through cell bars on a hallway floor. Or that of inmates sleeping in interlocking heaps in a county jail holdover tank in 1938 (p. 151). Crowding is similarly brought home to us when we view a dormitory crammed wall-to-wall with adjoining double-decker bunks in Texas, and we imagine ourselves sequestered amid the smell of sweat and the pervasive atmosphere of boredom. And congregate living comes alive in bird's-eye panoramas of mess halls the size of football fields, with men sitting shoulder to shoulder and front to back in endless and depressing rows, in which we can feel ourselves hopelessly circumscribed.

The text that is interspersed in the kaleidoscope of this book offers both relief and instruction. At times, words link ironically to images. On page 173, for instance, a picture shows a wide-eyed teddy bear on the metal bed of a training school in New Jersey. The accompanying text lists the cost of furnishings for a resident's room, totaling to $20.22. The roster includes six hangers (at one cent each), and a bible (35 cents). Other captions cite little-known facts, such as that O. Henry began his writing career as a prisoner in the Ohio Penitentiary in 1897. We also learn that 134,000 English convicts were transported to Australia and that John Howard, the premier prison reformer, died of jail fever (Typhus) in the Ukraine in 1790. There is an essay on Dr. Benjamin Rush, who pioneered prison classification, and one on Bentham's Panopticon, and a section on contractual labor. There are innumerable documents for those who want flavor as well as content, including excerpts from inmate Oscar[end page 38] Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Jail." Wilde reports that, "The brackish water that we drink/ Creeps with a loathsome slime,/ And the bitter bread they weigh on scales/ Is full of chalk and lime..."

Too much brackish water has passed under the bridge for comfort, and it is good that we are reminded of it. It is also good to be reminded of the fact that at every turn there have been men and women of conscience who have deplored the human waste and unseemly brutality of institutions of their day, and have sought to improve the lives of prisoners and conditions of imprisonment. And though things have cumulatively improved, they have also occasionally regressed where ideas and practices--such as those of leading progressives and the progenitors of the reformatory era--were too far ahead of their times. The history of imprisonment is thus more than a depressing journey through the underbelly of what passes for civilization. It is also the fascinating chronology of a struggle by penologists and practitioners to walk a fine line between humaneness and ugly, untrammelled punitiveness in the sequestration of malefactors. It's all in the book.

Rating: Four gavels

Hans Toch
Endnote

1. Three hundred and forty six pictures, to be exact, and 264 pages of text. Minus dust jacket, the book looks beautiful on a coffee table.[End page 39]