

## John Galsworthy to Charles Masterman, 27 July 1909

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## Note

### JOHN GALSWORTHY TO CHARLES

#### MASTERMAN, 27 JULY 1909: AN

#### UNCOLLECTED GALSWORTHY LETTER

Shortly after the publication of an open letter to the then Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, in May 1909 in the *Nation*, John Galsworthy corresponded with Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, the Chairman of the Prison Commission, on 23 July, and with Charles Masterman, the Under Secretary of the Home Office, on 27 July. In these letters, Galsworthy drew upon his first-hand observations from visits to Lewes and Chelmsford prisons to underscore the inhumane conditions of solitary confinement. Jill Felicity Durey's recent work (2021) has extensively cited Galsworthy's letters to Ruggles-Brise in this period, some of which had not been published previously, including the aforementioned one.<sup>1</sup> However, the letter to Masterman has remained overlooked in scholarly discourse. This oversight may be attributed to its inclusion in Masterman's personal collection, housed at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham, which has precluded its examination and mention in existing scholarship, including Harold Vincent Marrot's *The Life and Letters of John Galsworthy* (1935; 1973) and Edward Garnett's *Letters from John Galsworthy, 1900–32* (1934).<sup>2</sup>

However, this letter to Masterman, alongside the correspondence to Ruggles-Brise, significantly deepens our understanding of Galsworthy's pragmatic yet determined approach to penal reform. Within this communication, Galsworthy frankly acknowledged the challenges and institutional obstacles impeding penal reform, stating, 'I'm more than ever convinced [...] that this plea of deterrence will not hold water for a moment'. Integrating this letter into the analysis of his subsequent communications with the new Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, amplifies the

consistency and sincerity of Galsworthy's advocacy for a more humane approach to incarceration over the years.<sup>3</sup> This previously uncollected and unpublished letter to Masterman, which enriches scholarly discourses on Galsworthy's contributions to the humanitarian prison reform movement and the genesis of his play *Justice* (1910), reads as follows:

Private – 14 Addison Road, W.

July 27, 09

My dear Masterman,

You asked me to write to you after my visits to the collecting Prisons of Lewes and Chelmsford, where I saw the 'separate confinement' of convicts in full operation. I embodied my conclusions in a long letter to Sir Evelyn Ruggles Brise, which I should very much like you and the Home Secretary to look at, if Sir Evelyn will kindly let you.

Apart from the practical difficulties, (which I suppose will mainly resolve themselves into the two questions of rearrangement, and money), the objection to doing away with closed-cell confinement, both for convicts and other prisoners, rests entirely on the plea that it is deterrent. Before I go into that, I would say that by the adoption of a new 'shed' system (at Lewes) under which the convicts though 'separated', have not the same horrible closed-in conditions, and by the frank admission that this new system is an improvement on the old, Sir Evelyn has practically already condemned the closed-cell system.

He told me in so many words that he would substitute this new 'shed' system for closed-cells all over the prisons tomorrow, if he could. So far good! But there are only 38 of the new 'shed' cells, and some 1000 convicts, a year, begin serving new sentences of penal servitude; a long time must elapse before this consummation devoutly to be wished.

You will see that in my letter to Ruggles-Brise I urge that the 'recidivist' class convicts (who now serve nine months solitary closed-cell confinement) should be sent straight to convict

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Felicity Durey, *John Galsworthy's Compassion: All Beings Great and Small* (Palgrave, 2021), 51–4.

<sup>2</sup> CFGM/46/1/1/3/5, Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham.

<sup>3</sup> For letters between Galsworthy and Churchill on penal reform, see Marrot, *Life and Letters*, 676–85.

prisons to work from the start in association; and that the star class, (who now serve three months closed-cell) and the intermediate class (who now serve six months) should have their periods substantially reduced till such time as these sufficient new 'sheds' can be built.

What's really wanted of course is a new convict prison. But short of that, I feel that by clever dovetailing, if there were any real will to make the change, much might be done even at once to reduce the periods of closed-cell confinement now being served in all three classes.

And I certainly think that even if you had the improved 'shed' system in full blast, the periods of separation would be too long for the majority of prisoners.

Now as to the opposition to be encountered to any change at all, or at all events to substantial change, on the ground of deterrence, I'm more than ever convinced after seeing officials & prisoners, that this plea of deterrence will not hold water for a moment. It's really derived, in a confused way, from the belief that it's desirable and necessary to break a prisoner's will. This would probably not be admitted, but it's there all the same, *j'en ai eu des épreuves* – to employ the tongue of France.<sup>4</sup> It is also said that it is the penal and deterrent part of the convicts' sentence. But do read my letters to Ruggles-Brise – if he has not kept it, I could send you a copy.

I solemnly assert that it's all (except such short time as is necessary to observe a prisoner

closely for purposes of classification – a process which I suspect not in the wholesale conditions of prison life be very carefully carried out) sheer wasted suffering.

I do feel that with Herbert Gladstone & yourself at the helm, this is the moment to make a change. We shall never again get two men in office, who can both feel and see. I believe that if you will put pressure on, Ruggles-Brise can & will find a way. He is, I think, thoroughly disposed to do anything that he can reconcile with his conscience. His difficulty is in believing that this suffering is thrown away. But really it requires no more than very common sense to know that you cannot drive a human being utterly in upon himself & his own resources, without doing one of two things, (except in rare cases), either, harden & increase his perversion; or, desiccate and destroy his nervous force. I would like to meet and have a talk with Gladstone.

Farewell. Yrs, always,

John Galsworthy

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<sup>4</sup> *J'en ai eu des épreuves*: I have experienced these challenges.

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