



HAL
open science

Stephen A Toth. Mettray. A History of France's Most Venerated Carceral Institution. Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) [etc.] 2019. xii, 263 pp. Ill.

Jean-Lucien Sanchez

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Lucien Sanchez. Stephen A Toth. Mettray. A History of France's Most Venerated Carceral Institution. Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) [etc.] 2019. xii, 263 pp. Ill.. International Review of Social History, 2020, pp.361-363. 10.1017/S0020859020000450 . hal-02906387

HAL Id: hal-02906387

<https://hal.science/hal-02906387>

Submitted on 24 Jul 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

TOTH, STEPHEN A. *Mettray. A History of France's Most Venerated Carceral Institution*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) [etc.] 2019. xii, 263 pp. Ill. \$43.95. (E-book: \$21.99).

This monograph by Stephen A. Toth, Associate Professor of Modern European History at Arizona State University, is dedicated to the history of the Mettray penal and agricultural colony. Founded in 1840 by Frédéric-Auguste Demetz, this institution aimed to socially rehabilitate young delinquents by subjecting them to agricultural work in order to promote their moral regeneration. An ancestor to the *bagnes d'enfants* that the journalist Henri Danjou denounced in 1932, the colony of Mettray has become famous thanks in particular to one of its most famous residents, Jean Genet, who wrote about it in his book *Miracle de la Rose*, and to the chapter devoted to Mettray by Michel Foucault in his book *Surveiller et punir*. As Toth notes in the introduction to his book, according to Foucault Mettray constitutes the most successful disciplinary model and the culmination of the modern prison system following its birth at the end of the eighteenth century. While opening up an extremely stimulating field of research for historians, Foucault also bequeathed to them a conceptual “toolbox” that Toth questions and uses by proposing a history of power (paying particular attention to the resistance it provokes) and a history of juvenile bodies subjected to the injunctive canons of the masculinity of an era. To do this, Toth immerses his reader in a micro-history based on a rich bibliography and, above all, by an exhaustive examination of the archives of the penal colony of Mettray kept in the departmental archives of Indre-et -Loire.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, philanthropists, penal reformers, and magistrates became interested in the question of juvenile delinquency and its causes (“Origins”, chapter 1). Coming from the lower classes, the young *Gavroche* who walked the Parisian sidewalks were considered victims of a failed education provided by families too poor to support themselves. To remedy this situation, the lawyer Frédéric-Auguste Demetz envisaged a system of care for juvenile delinquents intended both to keep them out of prison, where they were subject to the deleterious influence of adults, and to keep them away from the corruption of major urban centres (particularly Paris). Drawing inspiration from the models he discovered during study trips to the United States and Europe, Demetz developed a penal colony project whose young inmates were subjected to a system of moral reform centred on a “substitute family”. Under the leadership of the *chef de famille*, they were subjected to rural work. This was supposed to promote their regeneration by bringing them closer to nature and allow them to acquire agricultural training to repopulate the countryside (p. 32).

Established on lands donated by Viscount Hermann de Brétignières de Courteilles (who co-directed the colony with Demetz until his death in 1852), the colony of Mettray was built in 1839 and received its first residents the following year. The minors detained there could include those found guilty but acquitted for having acted “without proper judgment” (*sans discernement*) in the commission of a crime (article 66 of the penal code); those sentenced to between six months and two years in prison; and those subject to “paternal correction”, that is to say imprisoned at the request of their fathers (they were imprisoned in Mettray in a *maison paternelle*, the subject of chapter 5). The colony comprised a central chapel flanked by ten pavilions and a disciplinary quarter. This architectural layout translated into stone the importance of religion, which remained, along with work, the cornerstone of the moral re-education intended in Mettray.

Even if the buildings were not enclosed by a wall, the disciplinary regime applied to the colony of Mettray rendered this institution a real penitentiary, the subject of the second chapter of the book (“Regime”). The children were divided into “families”, each headed by a family head (*chef de famille*), who applied a military-type discipline that the inmates were required to obey without fail. *Chefs de famille* were foremen (*contremâîtres*), who were

trained in Mettray and aided in their duties by an “elder brother” (*frère aîné*) chosen from among those with a record of good behaviour.

An inmate’s day began at five a.m. and finished at nine p.m. Its course was immutable and included eight hours of manual work, one and a half hours of instruction, and two hours and forty-five minutes devoted to meals and recreation. It was only during these times of recreation that the inmates were allowed to speak. Silence was mandatory during all other activities. During the weekends, the inmates were occupied mainly with gymnastic exercises, and during a Sunday “parade” they were required to participate in a military review. These various activities were supposed to instil in them values of virility and masculinity intended to transform them into “citizen-soldiers” (p. 59). Those who did not comply with this harsh discipline faced a range of punishments. Despite this threat, many inmates resisted the institution and its relentless settlement, the subject of the third chapter (“Resistance”). The author lists the various types of refusal by the inmates, ranging from homosexual practices, tobacco use, tattooing, or attempted escapes.

Over the years, the disciplinary system at Mettray increasingly became the subject of sharp criticism, in particular from the press. And, from the 1880s, even some of the deputies were shocked by the level of violence at the colony (“Discord”, chapter 4). This criticism and three scandals (in 1887, in 1909, and during the interwar period) led to the institution being discredited. This had an important impact on French society and led to its being closed on 5 November 1937 (“Denouement”, chapter 6). As Toth shows, what began as a resolutely utopian project that emerged from an optimistic representation of juvenile delinquents by reformers in the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by a slow drift towards a strictly authoritarian and punitive model.

*Jean-Lucien Sanchez*¹

Ministère de la Justice
Direction de l’administration pénitentiaire
13 place Vendôme, 75001 Paris, France
E-mail: jean-lucien.sanchez@justice.gouv.fr

¹ The author thanks Chris Gordon for his help in proofreading this review.