

Source B: 19th Century Non-Fiction

In 1897, the writer Oscar Wilde had recently been released from Reading Prison; shortly after, he writes a letter to The Daily Chronicle newspaper about a recent story they have published. It was common in the Victorian era for children to be put in adult prisons.

SIR, I learn with great regret, through the columns of your paper that the warder¹ Martin, of Reading Prison, has been dismissed by the Prisoner Commissioners for having given some sweet biscuits to a little hungry child. I saw the three children myself on Monday preceding my release. They had just
5 been convicted and were standing in a row in the central hall in their prison dress carrying their sheets under the arms, previous to their being sent to the cells allotted² to them.

They were quite small children, the youngest – the one to whom the warder gave the biscuits – being a tiny little chap, for whom they had evidently been unable to find clothes small enough to fit. I had, of course, seen many children in prison during the two years during which I was myself
10 confined. Wandsworth Prison, especially, contained always a large number of children. But the little child I saw on the afternoon of Monday the 17th at Reading, was tinier than any one of them.

I need not say how utterly distressed I was to see these children at Reading, for I knew the treatment in store for them. The cruelty that is practised by day and night on children in English prisons is incredible, except to those who have witnessed it and are aware of the brutality of the
15 system.

The terror of a child in prison is quite limitless. I remember once, in Reading, as I was going out to exercise, seeing in the dimly-lit cell right opposite my own, a small boy. Two warders – not unkindly men – were talking to him with some sternness apparently, or perhaps giving him some useful
20 advice about his conduct. One was in the cell with him, the other was standing outside. The child's face was like a white wedge of sheer terror. There was in his eyes the terror of a hunted animal.

The next morning I heard him at breakfast time crying and calling to be let out. His cry was for his parents. From time to time I could hear the deep voice of the warder on duty telling him to keep quiet. Yet he was not even convicted of whatever little offence he has been charged with. He was simply on remand³. That I knew by his wearing his own clothes, which seemed neat enough. He was,
25 however, wearing prisoner socks and shoes. This showed that he was a very poor boy, whose own shoes, if he had any, were in a bad state. Justices and magistrates⁴, an entirely ignorant class as a rule, often remand children for a week, and then perhaps remit whatever sentence they are entitled to pass. They call this “not sending a child to prisoner”. It is, of course, a stupid view on their part. To a little child whether he is in prison on remand or after conviction is not a subtlety of social position
30 he can comprehend. To him the horrible thing is to be there at all. In the eyes of humanity it should be a horrible thing for him to be there at all.

¹ *Warder: An old name for a Prison Guard or Warden*

² *Allotted: Something given or allocated to somebody*

³ *Remand: Being held in prison before trial, and therefore before being guilty*

⁴ *Justices and magistrates: Judges and people who sit in judgment in court*