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THE  
DARTMOOR MASSACRE

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By I. H. W.

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1815



## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Now that an American memorial <sup>1</sup> has been placed in the church at Prince Town, on Dartmoor, it is to be hoped that many more Americans than heretofore will visit that historic spot where so many American prisoners of war were confined during the weary years of 1812 to '15.

The records of the Dartmoor prison experiences of Americans are only nine in number, viz:

1. Andrews, Charles, "The Prisoner's Memoirs," New York, 1815. (This must have been the first published, as 1815 was the year when all the Americans were set free.)

2. Waterhouse, Benjamin, "Journal of a Young Man," &c., Boston, 1816.

3. "I. H. W.," "The Dartmoor Massacre." No place, 1815. (Probably the least known of all.)

4. Cobb, J. A., "A Younger's First Cruise," 2 vols., 1841.

5. Hawthorne, Nathaniel (editor), "The Papers of an Old Dartmoor Prisoner," in *Democratic Review*, vols. 18-19, 1846.

6. Catel, L., "La Prison de Dartmoor," Paris, 1847. (It is remarkable that, though so many of the prisoners were French and a number of them educated men, this is the only French account of the prison.)

7. "Dartmoor Prison," *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 48, p. 577, 1853.

8. "American Prisoners at Dartmoor," J. G. McNeil, in *Harper's Magazine*, September, 1904.

9. "The Story of Dartmoor Prison," Basil Thomson, London, 1907.

Numbers 7 and 9 are general histories, not specifically devoted to the American prisoners.

<sup>1</sup> See the *MAGAZINE* for July, 1910.



## AN ECHO OF DARTMOOR PRISON

### DARTMOOR PRISON AND THE CHURCH MEMORIAL

At the time we printed a short article on the famous prison (July, 1910) there was one item in our bibliography of the place which was so scarce that we had not been able to see it. Since then we have found a copy, had it transcribed, and now present it to our readers; the first time, we believe, that it has been reprinted since its original issue in 1815. No place of publication is given, but it was probably in a New England city, and very likely in Boston, since two-thirds of all the American prisoners were New Englanders, and one-third of the total number in the prison were from Massachusetts.

The identity of "I. H. W.," the author, has never been discovered.

As an appropriate preliminary to the poem, we reprint the greater part of the article referred to.

**T**HERE are five small books in English, one in French, and three magazine articles, which form the scanty library to which we are indebted for all we know of a place which had a large space in the War of 1812. Quite unmarked by literary style, each has a story to tell of years of imprisonment and hardship now nearly a century ago.

In the heart of the Dartmoor country in Southern England is a spot which was a desolate peat bog up to 1805. Then England and France being at war, more room for French prisoners was needed, and the famous granite structure destined to unpleasant notoriety as Dartmoor Prison, was begun. As a site it had nothing to recommend it, but there were politics then as now, and they prevailed. The buildings which were to hold at one time nearly ten thousand men were begun, and first occupied in 1809.

"The position chosen is often wrapped in dense fog when the surrounding country is clear, and it is colder and more rainy than places only four miles distant; and in compelling Frenchmen to live in such a place in winter without fires, the Government was ignorantly committing an act of positive cruelty.<sup>1</sup> The unfortunate prisoners of war were not as well fed as are the convicts who are now the inmates, and there can be no doubt that the contractors (for provisions) cheated them when they could."

By April, 1813, there were seventeen hundred Americans within the walls, and what they suffered may be read in Mr. Thomson's interesting book, the latest and probably the last authority, the author having been recently Governor of the prison.

"The winter of 1813-14 was memorable; the running stream that sup-  
<sup>1</sup> Thomson. He does not appear concerned about the Americans!

plied all the water froze to the bottom; the prisoners quenched their thirst with snow, and huddled together at night to prevent being frozen; their breath, condensing on the granite walls, covered these with a film of ice. Eight Americans escaped January 19th, when the weather was at its worst; seven were soon recaptured, the eighth a day after. All were put in the 'black hole' for ten days on two-thirds allowance. They were no more wretched than the rest, who passed this awful fortnight bare-legged, with salt beef for food and snow for drink, without fire or sufficient clothing, overrun with vermin and decimated by sickness."<sup>2</sup>

The best-known incident of the prison's history is that which forms the subject of the poem—the "Dartmoor Massacre," April 6, 1815.

Irritated by being kept in prison after the Treaty of Ghent was signed and proclaimed, there was a small riot, partly but not wholly among the Americans. The Governor, Captain Shortland, became "rattled," the prison guard fired on the Americans, and sixty-three men were killed or wounded (nine being killed or dying from wounds). Shortland was tried, but as the witnesses could not identify any of the soldiers who fired without orders, nothing came of it. Now, when war between England and the United States is an unthinkable thing, a beautiful and unique memorial to the American prisoners has been placed in the church at Princetown, near the prison—a large stained-glass window, suitably inscribed, given by the National Society United States Daughters of 1812. It was formally unveiled and presented by the president of the society June 4, 1910.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY OF DARTMOOR PRISON

1. Andrews, Charles. *The Prisoner's Memoirs*, N. Y., 1815.
2. Waterhouse, Benjamin. *The Journal of a Young Man, etc.*, Boston, 1816.
3. "I. H. W." *The Dartmoor Massacre* (poem), n. p., 1815.
4. Cobb, J. A. *A. Younker's First Cruise*, 1841.
5. Hawthorne, Nathaniel (Editor). *The Papers of an Old Dartmoor Prisoner*, in *Democratic Review*, Vols. 18-19, 1846.
6. Catel, L. *La Prison de Dartmoor*, Paris, 1847.
7. *Dartmoor Prison*. In *Fraser's Magazine*, Vol. 48, 1853.
8. *American Prisoners at Dartmoor*. J. G. McNeil in *Harper's Magazine* Sept., 1904.
9. *The Story of Dartmoor Prison*. Basil Thomson, London, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson.



## THE DARTMOOR MASSACRE!

Transposed in verse from the *New York Commercial Advertiser* of the 6th June last, and the Boston papers of the same month.

Being the authentic and particular account of the tragic massacre at Dartmoor prison in England on the 6th April, last, 1815, in which sixty-seven American prisoners there fell the victims to the jailor's revenge, for obtaining their due allowance of bread which had been withheld from them by the jailor's orders.

**N**OW war is o'er, and peace is come to greet our happy land,  
A tale, sad deed of wickedness, has lately come to hand;  
A tragic story you shall hear, from Britain comes the news

Of Yankee sailors there confin'd and how they have been us'd.  
Our hardy tars and seamen bold, a shameful dire disgrace!  
To British power and British rule, and Dartmoor was the place,  
This tragic scene was acted o'er sad dreadful massacre  
By one sad fellow, *Shortland* call'd, and all accounts agree  
That he a ruthless tyrant was,—most fell and savage plan  
And pre-concerted sought the lives of unoffending men.  
The 6th of April now last past, the evening of that day,  
When prisoners to their wards retir'd, and quiet went away—  
To take their rest in calm content, well knowing of the peace,  
And humble hope, and perfect trust, they soon would have release;  
And to their country joyful come, to wives and children dear,  
To fathers, mothers, kindred, friends, who'd shed full many a tear  
For their mishap, by chance of war, from their embraces torn;  
But joy, had now begun to dawn, in prospect of return,  
And cheerful was each youthful heart, and more experienc'd tar,  
As peace had now been quite confirm'd, and ended was the war.  
In pleasing thoughts, and grateful hopes, another day had gone,  
And patience now each sailor had, quite sure of his return.  
But Shortland, he the jailor was, and great advantage had;  
Instead of good bread, he decreed, each prisoner should have bad,  
And that full short one half a pound, to ev'ry captive soul,  
The wicked, vile, the cheating knave, has prov'd a murderer foul.

—This poem has not, we believe, been reprinted since its appearance in 1815.—(Ed.)

The late arrivals at New-York, the news doth full explain,  
 The papers there, do full declare this bad proceeding plain,  
 Transcrib'd correctly, to be found in journals of our town,  
 Transpos'd from prose, now into verse, as plainly will be found.  
 Now hear the story full and true, a journal fully giv'n,  
 Correct reported by the press, express from Dartmoor prison.  
 The gentle jailor, careful soul, one day to Plymouth went,  
 But orders gave, 'ere he set out, what bread he would have sent,  
 To ev'ry pris'ner in his charge, a pound, not one ounce more,  
 Tho' a pound and half each man receiv'd the very day before,  
 As that was due by right and rule to captive young or old,  
 A pris'ner there, his just due share, 'twas cheating to withhold—  
 One half a pound!—remorseless and unfeeling man this jailor sure  
                   must be

From ev'ry pris'ner to exact so large, so great a fee!  
 Nor he nor care, nor feeling had, but feeling for himself,  
 And thus he meant his purse to fill by such ill-gotten pelf.  
 The pris'ners they in humble sort such treatment did refuse,  
 And thought it hard by one vile man, to be so much abus'd  
 And patiently 'til setting sun, was closing in the day  
 They waited for their daily bread, from prison did not stray;  
 But finding now their bread withheld, and was to them deny'd,  
 They broke the door and ask'd their right, and to the guards they  
                   cry'd;

The officers in garrison, well thought their murmurs just,  
 And deem'd the keeper much to blame, to abuse so great a trust;  
 The conduct of the keeper too they much did reprobate,  
 The day was sped, the men got bread in ev'ning though 'twas late.  
 The next day, Shortland being told, what pass'd the day before,  
 When he at Plymouth absent was, away then from Dartmoor,  
 Resolv'd a vile and savage plan, inhuman and unjust,  
 To find pretext on unarm'd men, his bayonets to thrust;  
 And soon he found a wicked way to find out a pretence,  
 That pris'ners they would run away, or 'scape thro' wall or fence;

A vile and weak pretence it was, the news if we have right,  
 Not to secure, but murder sure, the pris'ners in his sight,  
 In malice and revenge, for what had pass'd some days before,  
 When he away at Plymouth was, and absent from Dartmoor.  
 In story now it does appear correct and truly penn'd,  
 And you may judge and see it plain if you will well attend,  
 This artful, base designing man the pris'ners to annoy;  
 The alarm bell rung! the guard call'd out the pris'ners to destroy;  
 Forsooth, there was great fear to dread, he'd search'd and found  
                   in wall

A hole was made for boy to creep, and get again a ball,  
 Which oft was thrown by boys at play, their usual daily sport,  
 In pastime who at prison wall, did ev'ry day resort;  
 And frequent would their balls bounce o'er out of the prison yard,  
 And frequent were the boys deny'd by surly churlish guard  
 To get again their balls for sport, their pastime and their play,  
 And so their joy was oft times spoilt and ended for the day.  
 The boys thus baulk'd, and being griev'd to lose their balls and play,  
 Contriv'd to make a hole to gain and get their balls away;  
 The vigilance of *Shortland* now, this creeping hole espy'd;  
 "Oh! Oh!" said he, "this shall not be," and to the guard he cry'd  
 "These Yanky rogues do now design to get away from prison,  
 "And me the keeper, you the guard, to hold us in derision.  
 "Their Yankee tricks, they now have fix'd, they broke the prison  
                   wall.

" 'Tis now twilight, before 'tis night; they'll 'scape sure one and all,  
 "No time to lose, nor can we choose, who shall command the guard,  
 "With me I say come march away into the prison yard,  
 "I'll quick disperse, these rogues perverse, secure them live or dead!  
 "March on I say, with me away, and I will take the lead!  
 "Sound first the bell a dismal dell, and let them know we're coming,  
 "With gun and sword, upon my word we'll overmatch their  
                   cunning."

The guard turn'd out, but still in doubt, with Shortland march'd  
away,

From village, town to prison come, begin the bloody fray  
Which soon was ended—dire mishap! It was a murd'ring deed  
That Yanky tars secure from wars, in peace were doom'd to bleed.  
The noise and ringing of the bell, the pris'ners did alarm,  
Who thought and felt they were secure protected from all harm;  
And void of blame, in yard they came incited by the bell,  
And never thought by gun and shot they'd scattered be pell-mell.  
The soldiers kind to them inclin'd, gave warning to disperse,  
Reluctant were they to obey, to shoot them—sure averse.  
Now Shortland he perceiving this, and disappointment fear'd,  
In savage and revengeful ire, turn'd round upon the guard,  
And from a soldier basely seiz'd, his gun with ruffian might,  
And quickly shot a Yanky tar, a bloody deed, that night.

His vile example and command, was fatally obey'd,  
And soon consign'd were seven brave tars, untimely to the grave.  
Besides the wounded that did fall, that sad and fatal night,  
In morning to behold their wounds, it was a woful sight;  
Full sixty men in number told, most shocking to behold,  
Whose limbs were maim'd, and some lop't off thro' cursed love of  
gold,

For this alone had been the cause that *Shortland* stop'd their bread;  
Thus, sixty men were maim'd and woun'd, and seven were shot quite  
dead.

What satisfaction can be made for such a fatal deed,  
To widows, parents, children dear, whose hearts must surely bleed,  
When such sad tidings reach their ears, their grief must sure be  
great,

To widows, parents, children dear, most shocking to relate.  
If wickedness upon this earth was always here condemn'd,  
Sure *Shortland* short on gibbet high, by rope should be suspen'd;  
But Heav'n best knows how to dispose, the wicked and the just,  
To God alone for justice now, must be the widows' trust.

The orphan and the father too, and mothers, sisters dear,  
And brothers, kindred, dearest friends, in grief must shed a tear;  
And if the victims that did fall upon this fatal night  
Were not to blame, it will be shame, if Britain don't do right,  
To succor those, the *maim'd and lame*, who're now depriv'd from  
    labor,  
And cannot work but now must beg, or seek their bread by favor;  
And recompence is justly due,—to widows, children, mothers,  
And fathers agéd, helpless left by cursed SHORTLAND's orders.

I. H. W.

*Finis*

