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# John Howard's Contagious Institutions

Spencer J. Weinreich

Spencer J. Weinreich is a doctoral candidate in the history of science at Princeton University, completing a dissertation on the history of solitary confinement.

John Howard, *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe; with Various Papers Relative to the Plague*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for J. Johnson, C. Dilly, and T. Cadell, 1791).

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On the flyleaf of his journal for 1786–87, John Howard (c.1726–90) inscribed this credo: “A Traveller should have Temperance, Prudence, & Fortitude or firmness of Mind to bear sufferings or meet dangers undaunted. These make or are necessary for ye active scenes of Life & mantaining [*sic*] the rights of others for the truest pleasures arise from active Benevolence. Dejection & despair are the consequences of Pusalinimity [*sic*].”[1]

Well might Howard need fortitude in 1786. He was running “the greatest risk of my life” in touring the plague hospitals and lazarettos (quarantine facilities) of Europe, with an eye toward building a lazaretto in England.[2] Though plague had not been seen in Britain for a century, every inbound ship could potentially be “importing the plague,” as the celebrated physician John Haygarth (1740–1827) put it.[3] And plague was merely the vanguard of a host of maladies, a knot of anxieties around disease, poverty, and disorder that hung over 18th-century thought like a miasmatic cloud.[4] Eventually, Howard resolved that if he was to write about quarantines, he must get himself quarantined. And where better than Venice, home to “the mother of all lazarettos”? He even found a ship with a foul bill of health so as to undergo the most rigorous quarantine regimen.[5] He spent 42 days in quarantine, armed with “the strongest recommendations from the Venetian ambassador to have everything flung open to me.”[6]

Howard spent his stay badgering the staff in his rough Italian about the regulations, which were “wise and good,” but so poorly executed “as to render the quarantine almost useless.”[7] His first room he pronounced uninhabitable; the second acceptable but “very cold, dirty, and offensive.”[8] The walls, “not having been cleaned probably for half a century, were saturated with infection. I got them washed repeatedly with boiling water, to remove the offensive smell, but without any effect.”[9]

Accosting officials and meddling in institutional life was Howard’s vocation. He had spent more than a decade inspecting every prison, hospital, and workhouse he could talk his way into. His first book, *The State of the Prisons* (1777) made penal reform an urgent issue of the day by exposing the miseries endured by prisoners in the Age of Enlightenment.[10] Howard gave his views “as firmly, as freely, and as faithfully, in the presence of kings, senators, and magistrates, as of turnkeys, and goalers.”[11] Howard’s *Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe* (1789) is a curious volume, more about prisons than quarantine, yet its very peculiarities delineate the working practices and assumptions of 18th-century reform.

## Howard’s *Account*

Howard explained that he had been “led by the similarity of the subject to extend my views from prisons and hospitals to Lazarettos,” and the *Account* is best understood as a continuation of *The State of the Prisons*. [12] Both derived their authority not from any especial learning or originality, [13] but from “their doggedly empirical character”—from the thousands of miles Howard traveled, from the hundreds of institutions he inspected, from the mass of data he collected. [14]

Data makes up most of the *Account*, which begins with Howard’s tours of European lazarettos, followed by his proposal for a British lazaretto. After a dossier of materials on the subject of plague—professional medical opinions, plague protocols, a narrative account of 1784 outbreak at Spalato (Split)—Howard dedicates the remaining four-fifths of the volume to his latest findings on institutions from Dublin to Constantinople.

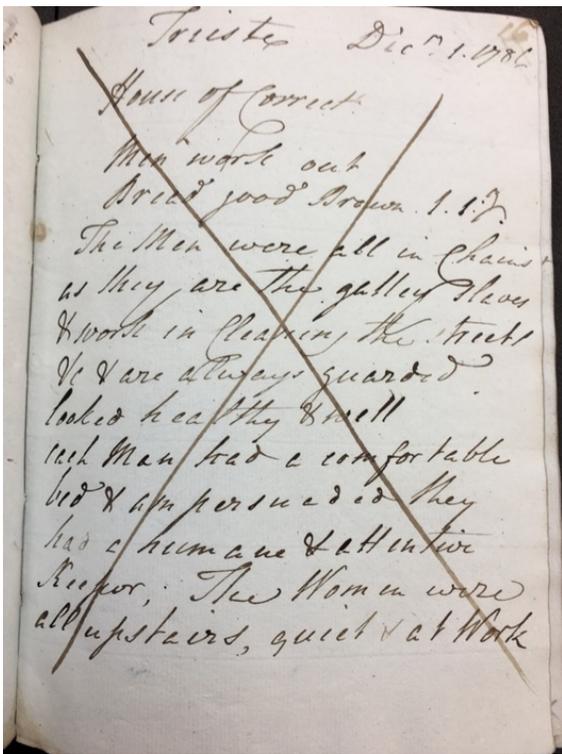


Figure 1. Bodleian Eng. misc. e 400, 16.

To take a single example, Howard visited the house of correction at Trieste and took the following notes (fig. 1): “Men work out Bread good Brown 1.1:2. The Men were all in Chains as they are the galley slaves & work in Cleaning the streets &c. & are always guarded. looked healthy & well each Man had a comfortable bed & am persuaded they had a humane & attentive Keeper; The Women were all upstairs, quiet & at Work.”[15] In the published entry, composed from the journals, fragmentary notes become prose:

The Galley-Slaves (so called) were lodged in a house of correction which was lately a convent; the men below, and the women above stairs. The men were in chains, and employed in cleaning the streets, bridges &c. The women were carding, spinning &c. in the house. I saw them at dinner on wholesome bread and soup. They looked healthy; and from the placidness of their countenances, I inferred the humanity of their keeper; and I was a witness of his shewing them an attention which in such houses, is of particular importance.[16]

These entries map out Howard’s work geographically and temporally, layering more recent visits over earlier ones—an atlas of reform’s unstable fortunes.

Howard commissioned plates reproducing floorplans and façades, as well as a rendering of the British lazaretto he imagined (fig. 2), carefully tracking which images remained to be engraved and who had the commission (fig. 3).[17]

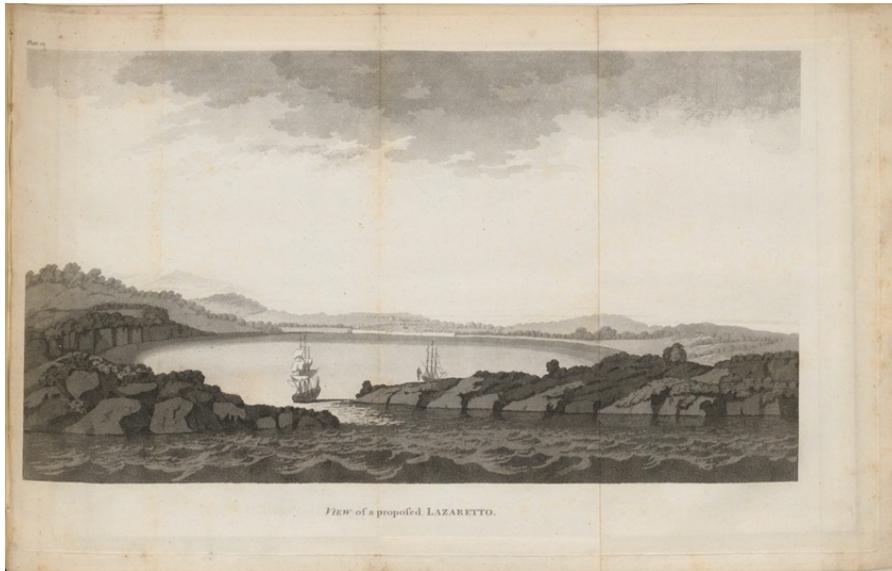


Figure 2. "View of a Proposed Lazaretto," Howard, Account, n.p.

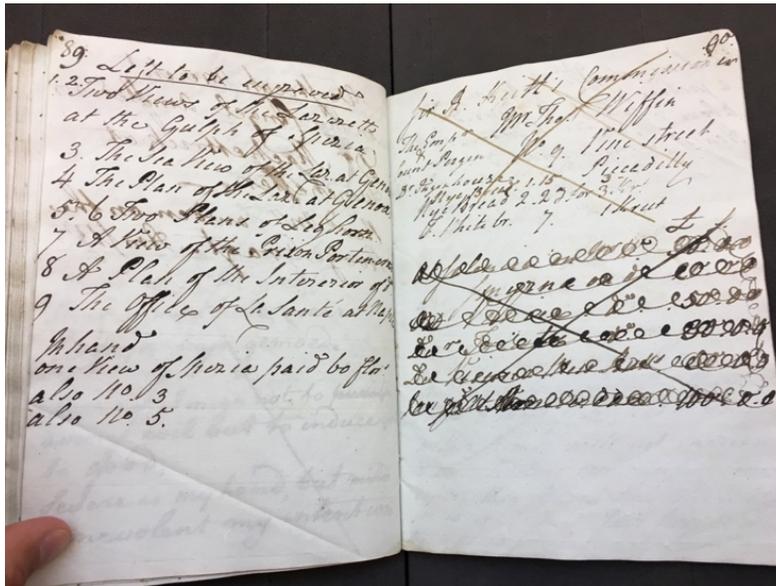


Figure 3. Bodleian Eng. misc. 3 400, 89–90. Image by Spencer J. Weinreich.

## Carceral Archipelagos in the Venetian Lagoon

Howard's shuttling between the islands of the disciplinary archipelago—prisons to hospitals to asylums to schools—reminds us that long before *Discipline and Punish* (1975), reformers understood that “[t]he prison is like a rather disciplined barracks, a strict school, a dark workshop, but not qualitatively different.”[18] Michel Foucault (1926–84) certainly knew Howard’s work,[19] and shared his fascination with quarantine, which he located at the root of modern discipline itself: “the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects.”[20] From the new technologies of control developed in quarantine sprang the penitentiary and the hospital.[21] Howard, who became the ideologist of the modern penitentiary through his struggle against contagion, was enmeshed in Foucauldian webs.[22]

But all enlightenment reform was, in modern parlance, joined-up government: improvements in public health were bound up with improvements in law, commerce, education, and culture. This was true as a theoretical matter—the virtuous citizen would also be healthful, obedient, and prosperous—and as a practical matter of discipline and subject-formation.[23] Philanthropists envisioned the prison as “a place of systematic physical and moral hygiene: a model and well-ordered community.”[24] It was a sort of moral hospital, a place where people were made better, one intended “to *alleviate their miseries, and correct their vices.*”[25]

The *Account* evinces what might be called the institutional imaginary of 18th-century reform, which tackled social ills of all kinds via

the creation, expansion, and reorganization of institutions, guided by a “sense of the paramountcy of order and regulation.”[26] These institutions, as confined spaces in which imperfect bodies were clustered together, fell under the same sanitary rubric. Whether inmates were confined because they were mad, bad, or dangerous to know, the same considerations would dictate public health outcomes.[27]

The principles that governed the reformed prison thus closely resembled those for a reformed hospital. The *Account* applies to lazarettos and hospitals the critiques of prisons advanced in *The State of the Prisons*: failures of sanitation and discipline, fees and other venalities, official neglect.[28] Howard lists “*cleanliness, air, diet, separation, and attention*” as “[t]he primary objects in all hospitals,” but they are no less essential to his penal program.[29] Howard extrapolates from lazarettos in Venice and Zante (Zakynthos) to prisons in London, and even makes bolder comparisons. From his quarantine in Venice, Howard wrote to his friend, Samuel Whitbread (1720–96), then member of parliament for Bedford, warning him to “avoid those night-sittings in the House,” as “the air is not many degrees better than that around my present habitation.”[30]

## Self-Incarceration

Howard was hardly a model of prudence, having made a career of thrusting himself into unsavory locations, heedless of danger. The Venetian escapade nearly killed him several times over—his possibly plague-ridden ship, a narrow escape from pirates, and weeks of enduring “the slow hospital fever creeping over me by my long confinement—the whole air of the lazaretto being infected.”[31] He had been chased out of France by Bourbon agents; he traveled armed in case of bandits.[32] He had volunteered to be a prisoner of the Inquisition for a month if he could see the dungeons in Valladolid (the offer was refused).[33]

To his profound discomfort, Howard was idolized for his bravery, selflessness, and “(Godlike) Philanthropy,” as “the guardian angel of mankind.”[34] Yet I suggest that these exploits are of a piece with the empiricism that marked everything Howard did. His method was always to see for himself and to verify and reverify what he found.[35] In Rotterdam, he insisted on being sealed inside a darkened punishment cell. He traveled with scales to weigh inmates’ rations. His visits were carefully dated and his observations set out baldly in tables.[36]

Howard thus becomes legible as a self-experimenter, a “martyr for science.”[37] He became his own instrument for studying Italian lazarettos or Dutch jails.[38] His willingness to subject himself to conditions others dared not imbued his pronouncements with a particular (perhaps providential) authority.[39]

Self-experimentation’s creative tensions emerge from rendering subjective experience into communicable scientific fact.[40] Howard used his books to disseminate his findings, while his correspondence reveals an international network of informants, exchanging updates on everything from prison conditions in Georgia to the court gossip at Saint Petersburg.[41] On May 8, 1786, the British vice-consul at Genoa, Joseph Brame (n.d.), forwarded Howard the opinions of Mediterranean professionals on contagion, flagging the replies “from the Professors Raymond & De Moulins of Marseilles, People of great Credit, and more esteemed there than those you pointed out, who are employed at the Lazarettoes.” In keeping with Enlightened etiquette, Brame provides this assistance gratis, but remarks that he would be most interested in a copy of Howard’s book, and includes an address to which “any you may be pleased to send” may be directed.[42]

Brame was only one of many British diplomats, up to the foreign secretary himself, who extended their aid to the philanthropist-errant.[43] In the age of the Grand Tour, Howard met his countrymen everywhere, from wandering aristocrats in Italy to professional soldiers in Russia.[44]

## The Valedictory Edition

The *Account* closes with Howard’s intention to undertake another voyage, this time into Russian and Ottoman territory, as far as Egypt. Haygarth hoped he might settle the question of the plague’s etiology. “While I very sincerely regret this journey so dangerous to a life of great importance to your country and to mankind, the consolation, that it may answer such valuable purposes, in some degree reconciles the idea to my mind.”[45] Howard himself had meditated:

To my country I commit the result of my past labours. ... Should it please God to cut off my life in the prosecution of this design, let not my conduct be *uncandidly* imputed to *rashness* or *enthusiasm*, but to a *serious, deliberate* conviction that I am pursuing the path of *duty*; and to a sincere desire of being made an instrument of more extensive usefulness to my fellow-creatures than could be expected in the narrower circle of a retired life.[46]

His words proved prophetic. Howard died on January 20, 1790, in Cherson in Ukraine, after a short illness. That his life was cut off, while bearing “the torch of philanthropy ... into remote countries,” cemented his status as a saint of the Enlightenment.[47]

Howard’s literary executors produced a new edition of the *Account* (1791), supplemented with Howard’s notes from his final journey and an exchange of letters with Haygarth. Together with the fourth edition of *The State of the Prisons* (1792), this second edition of the *Account* became definitive handbooks for generations of reformers. “By 1860, most prisoners in Europe and North America marched to Howard’s cadence and endured the solitude of his visions.”[48] His texts were widely imitated, in Britain and around the world, by

officials and private philanthropists.[49] Howard was literally iconic, rendered by playwrights, artists, and adoring biographers (fig. 4).[50] Yet he was always part of a “wave for prison reform, itself part of the late-Enlightenment tide of opinion impatient to reconstruct all manner of institutions ... to meet the needs of modernity.”[51]



Figure 4. George Romney, *Howard Visiting a Prison* (late 18th cent.), Yale Center for British Art, accession no. B1979.12.665.

The extent of Howard’s direct influence remains open to question.[52] Certainly no one ever built a lazaretto in England’s green and pleasant land—the one attempt to do so proved a disaster—with only a few derelict warships pressed into service as a floating quarantine.[53] What John H. Langbein bitingly called the “fairy tale,” the notion that reform came about from the exhortations of heroic philanthropists, is unsustainable.[54] But fears about filth and disease did generate the political will needed to realize the reformers’ expensive propositions.[55] By exposing Europe’s institutions as sinks of contagion, Howard stoked these anxieties and so fueled the project of reform. Perversely enough for the traveler who sailed in a spirit of “Temperance, Prudence, & Fortitude or firmness of Mind,” his contribution to the Enlightenment was to teach his contemporaries how to fear.

## Notes

[1] Bodl. Eng. misc. e. 400, flyleaf.

[2] Quoted in James Baldwin Brown, *Memoirs of the Public and Private Life of John Howard, the Philanthropist* (London: Printed for Rest Fenner, 1818), 467.

[3] John Howard, *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe; with Various Papers Relative to the Plague*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for J. Johnson, C. Dilly, and T. Cadell, 1791), appendix p. 22; J. C. McDonald, “The History of Quarantine in Britain during the 19th Century,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 25, no. 1 (February 1951): 22–44, here 22–23.

[4] Kevin Siena, *Rotten Bodies: Class and Contagion in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[5] William Hepworth Dixon, *John Howard, and the Prison-World of Europe*, 2nd ed. (London: Jackson and Walford, 1850), 354; Howard, *Account*, 10.

[6] John Howard, *Correspondence of John Howard, the Philanthropist, Not Before Published*, ed. John Field (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), 114.

- [7] Howard, *Account*, 22.
- [8] Howard, *Correspondence*, 125.
- [9] Howard, *Account*, 11.
- [10] Rod Morgan, "Divine Philanthropy: John Howard Reconsidered," *History* 62, no. 206 (October 1977): 388–410, here 392; Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution 1750–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), xi.
- [11] Brown, *Memoirs*, 642.
- [12] Howard, *Account*, 26.
- [13] Ralph W. England, Jr., "Who Wrote John Howard's Text? The State of the Prisons as a Dissenting Enterprise," *The British Journal of Criminology* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 203–15, here 210; Morgan, "Divine Philanthropy," 391.
- [14] Joanna Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 162.
- [15] Bodl. Eng. misc. e. 400, 16.
- [16] Howard, *Account*, 65–66.
- [17] Bodl. Eng. misc. e. 400, 89; Bodl. Eng. misc. e. 401, fols. 42v–43r.
- [18] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 233.
- [19] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 123; Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 52–53, 63.
- [20] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198. See Stuart Elden, "Plague, Panopticon, Police," *Surveillance & Society* 1, no. 3 (2003): 240–53.
- [21] Alan McKinlay, "Foucault, Plague, Defoe," *Culture and Organization* 15, no. 2 (June 2009): 167–84, here 168–69.
- [22] Jonathan Simon, "The Return of the Medical Model: Disease and the Meaning of Imprisonment from John Howard to Brown v. Plata," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 217–56, here 225.
- [23] Ignatieff, *Just Measure of Pain*, 60–62; Margaret DeLacy, *Prison Reform in Lancashire, 1700–1850: A Study in Local Administration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 87–89.
- [24] Morgan, "Divine Philanthropy," 398; Roy Porter, "Howard's Beginning: Prison, Disease, Hygiene," in *The Health of Prisoners: Historical Essays*, ed. Richard Creese, W. F. Bynum, and J. Bearn (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1995), 5–26, here 11.
- [25] John Aikin, *A View of the Character and Public Services of the Late John Howard, Esq. LL.D. F.R.S.* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1792), 77.
- [26] Porter, "Howard's Beginning," 11; DeLacy, *Prison Reform in Lancashire*, 65.
- [27] Roy Porter, "Cleaning up the Great Wen: Public Health in Eighteenth-Century London," *Medical History Supplement* 11 (1991): 61–75, here 71; DeLacy, *Prison Reform in Lancashire*, 89.
- [28] Howard, *Account*, 140–41.
- [29] Howard, *Account*, appendix p. 18.
- [30] Howard, *Correspondence*, 122; Howard, *Account*, 9–11.
- [31] Quoted in Dixon, *John Howard*, 353.
- [32] Brown, *Memoirs*, 430–31; Howard, *Correspondence*, 98–99, 175.
- [33] Dixon, *John Howard*, 307–08.
- [34] Bodl. Eng. misc. c. 332, fols., 42r, 53r.
- [35] Brown, *Memoirs*, 223.
- [36] Tessa West, *The Curious Mr Howard: Legendary Prison Reformer* (Hook: Waterside Press, 2011), 129, 193.

- [37] Stuart Walker Strickland, "The Ideology of Self-Knowledge and the Practice of Self-Experimentation," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 453–71, here 456.
- [38] Strickland, "Ideology of Self-Knowledge," 454, 458.
- [39] Dixon, *John Howard*, 125; Jan Golinski, "Humphry Davy: The Experimental Self," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 15–28, here 21–22.
- [40] Strickland, "Ideology of Self-Knowledge," 460.
- [41] See Bodl. Eng. misc. c. 332; Howard, *Correspondence*.
- [42] Bodl. Eng. misc. c. 332, fol. 7r–v.
- [43] BL Add. MS 35541, fols. 299r, 340r–341r; Howard, *Correspondence*, 28–29, 127.
- [44] Richard W. Ireland, "Howard and the Paparazzi: Painting Penal Reform in the Eighteenth Century," *Art, Antiquity and Law* 4, no. 1 (March 1999): 55–62, here 56.
- [45] Bodl. Eng. misc. c. 332, fols. 35r–36v, quotation at 36v.
- [46] Howard, *Account*, 235.
- [47] Howard, *Account*, appendix p. 3.
- [48] Ignatieff, *Just Measure of Pain*, 209.
- [49] Innes, *Inferior Politics*, 162; England, "Who Wrote John Howard's Text?," 207; Siena, *Rotten Bodies*, 214.
- [50] See Ireland, "Howard and the Paparazzi."
- [51] Porter, "Howard's Beginning," 5–6.
- [52] Morgan, "Divine Philanthropy"; DeLacy, *Prison Reform in Lancashire*, 58, 77; Porter, "Howard's Beginning," 15.
- [53] McDonald, "History of Quarantine," 24.
- [54] John H. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof: Europe and England in the Ancien Régime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10.
- [55] DeLacy, *Prison Reform in Lancashire*, 81; Philippa Hardman, "Fear of Fever and the Limits of the Enlightenment: Selling Prison Reform in Late Eighteenth-Century Gloucestershire," *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 4 (2013): 511–31; Siena, *Rotten Bodies*.