

Mr Swift Macneille

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He had looked up the regulations dealing with this matter, and he had found that the birching was to be confined solely to boys rated as such, and to be inflicted with the birch supplied by the dockyards, that the punishment was to be inflicted over the bare breech, that it was never to exceed twenty-four strokes, and that it was to be inflicted by the ship's police in the presence of the medical officer and others.

He had looked up the regulations to see for what kind of offences that punishment could be inflicted and he found them most trivial.

He had asked the Civil Lord of the Admiralty to make some alteration of the horrible regulation compelling boys to witness these floggings, but the hon. Gentleman declined to do so.

What had since happened?

Only last December there was a Court-martial on board the "Victory." He visited the vessel in that month, and was prevented from going into Nelson's cabin by the mere fact that a Court-martial was being held. [**My comment** "Victory was afloat in Portsmouth harbour until 1922"] But he was present at the close, and saw the prisoner emerge, and he never **witnessed such a look of agony and despair on a boy's face** as on that occasion.

What were the circumstances under which that boy was tried?

He had been compelled with a crowd of other boys to be present, on one of the cruisers at the flogging of one of his companions, and he had been so overwhelmed by what he saw that he attacked the officer inflicting the punishment and almost knocked him down.

Of course his offence was a very shocking one, but it was possible to sympathise with the feelings of the lad under such circumstances.

He, of course, was also put upon his trial and was sentenced to a long term of hard labour, and to receive in addition twenty-four lashes.

It was actions such as that which tended to produce rebellion in the Navy. It simply drove men to madness.

There was another Court-martial at Devonport to which he would like to draw attention. In that case the boy had committed the **very atrocious offence of stealing a few pence and had deserted his ship.**

For that he was very properly dismissed the Navy, but more was done. The full maximum flogging of twenty-four strokes with the birch was ordered to be inflicted, and he ventured to assert that that was both unconstitutional and illegal, for the lad having been dismissed the service there could have been no right to flog him in addition.

There was one special fact which struck him in connection with this matter, and that was that it was the children of the poor who were subjected to these indignities.

The naval cadets and midshipmen in the service were not flogged, the flogging was reserved for the sons of the poor who had to pay the piper.

He hoped that these facts would become known wherever the English working men had a vote.

He had been furnished with a vast amount of information upon the subject, but he was not going to take up the time of the House by communicating it. Amongst his informants was an Anglican clergyman whose tender heart revolted at what he had heard, and who told him that the **greatest apprehension Â prevailed among the parents of the children on board the training ships.**

Even for not being able to swim birching and caning was inflicted.

He put a question to the Secretary to the Admiralty on that point, and his reply was that it was better to teach a boy to swim by flogging than to allow him to drown without flogging.

He could assure the hon. Gentleman that an answer of that kindâ€”a nice, pithy, little, after-dinner society jokeâ€”did more to accentuate the feeling against this horrible system than the finest speeches one could make, either before or after dinner.

A short time ago an article was published by Mr. Tighe Hopkins, who declared that flogging and anything which tended to degrade the person was shocking, and that there should be complete statistics furnished in regard to it, but he was sorry to say that there were no statistics as to the canings in the Navy. He had asked for them several times, but he had never been able to get them. He had been told that to obtain them for the last three years would be too expensive. Yes, it would be too expensive in the votes which the Secretary to the Admiralty and his Party would lose if the system were made public.

He had, however, obtained a Return“a very poor, meagre, stingy Return“which would meet his purpose to some extent. **It was a Return for the year 1901“2, and it stated that in that period there were 238 birchings by summary conviction“by the nod of the captain's head“and only three by Court-martial, while there were something like 12,000 minor offences among the boys, and for those minor offences at least 8,000 canings were inflicted.**

The Return for last year showed a slight decrease in the figures, there having been 250 birchings and about 8,000 canings. He felt it incumbent upon him to do what he could to put a stop to this.

The weight of the birch used upon these poor boys was twice as heavy as that used in civil life, by order of the magistrate and the Judge, for the punishment of boys guilty of the most atrocious crimes and offences.

The cane used weighed 2 oz., was 3 feet long, and was laced round with waxed twine like the handle of a cricket bat. When the Fleet under the command of Lord Charles Beresford Â came into Dublin Bay he pretty well knew what was going on, and he wrote to the people of Ireland through the Freeman's Journal, and pointed out the dark and sinister designs of these ships upon the youths of Ireland, and **warned the parents not to let their sons join the Navy.**