**Transcript made by Assistant Professor Dr Paul Keenan (LSE, Department of International History) 5 March 2020. To quote from the text, please consult the original document.**   
  
Lancaster Castle

June 17th 1840

My dear Allsop,

A fellow prisoner has contrived to get smuggled into our ward for my use four sheets of paper, 4 penny postage stamps, about three thimble fulls of ink and a little sealing wax – Whereby I am enabled to steal a march on our worthy Governor by writing four letters unknown to him of which this is one. I would have written to you before known the regular way, that is, under the inspection of an officer of the gaol, but was not sure that you would like to hear from me under such degrading circumstances. It is anything but desirable to be known as the friend of such a notorious offender as your humble servant, and that is the reason for my writing “under the rose [i.e. sub rosa]”

            In this interval between my trials in Newcastle and Liverpool I had to run up to London about the Southern Star. I went twice to your office in Cornhill in the hope of seeing you, but you were away. I was very conscious to see you for many reasons, but chiefly for one. Let me tell it now, as it will relieve my mind – I learned in the Country through letters from Carpenter, that he (Carpenter) had applied to you for pecuniary and to carry on the Southern Star, and that he had also applied to Mr Smith for the same purpose. From the tone of his letters I inferred that he had used my name in such manner as to make me appear a party to the applications. I had no idea, at the time, of the villainy of which that man is capable. But it was enough for me that he applied for money to two of my friends to whom I was, at the time, under heavy obligations, without any apparent prospect of being able soon to discharge them. I never in my life felt such indignation. I would rather lose my right hand, at the time, than apply for money under such circumstances especially to throw away in a paper which had little prospect of success. That, with other circumstances, made me break off several engagements I had in the Country – more especially one to meet Mr Ballantyne of the Bolton Free Press, on the Corn-law question – and start suddenly for London, and my principal cause for being so conscious there to see you was to assure you most solemnly that Carpenter’s applications to both you and Mr Smith were made not only without my knowledge or assent, but with a perfect knowledge on Carpenter’s part, than no earthly consideration would induce me

p.3

I write this in my cell, being locked up for the night. We are regularly locked up every evening at 7 o clock, and during the six winter months will be locked up from 4 PM till 8 o clock next morning, ie, for 16 hours out of the 24. It was 8 o clock when I began to write, it has just struck nine. The loneliness of the place is perhaps one cause for the melancholy tone of this epistle. A headache which I have had all day is perhaps another – but the principal cause is some vague unaccountable impression on my mind that Tho[ma]s Allsop is no longer my friend. If it be so, tell me frankly. If it be not – write me one kind note – as short or as long as you like – and make me happier than I have been since I came here.

            You may be curious perhaps to know how we get on here. On our arrival we were locked up in a darkish room for about 2 hours – two keepers or turnkeys were then sent to release us and the same time to relieve us of our cash, watches, keys and every thing else on our persons – All had to be given up. We were then taken to the surgion [sic] who examined our hands and wrists very minutely to see if we had the itch – We were then obliged to strip and go into a huge stone trough called a “bath” with about 7 inches deep of water in it to “bathe” – during which ceremony our clothes underwent a very strict search. Our trunks & luggage underwent a similar scrutiny, and the result was that all our papers, books, memorandums, &c. &c. – in short, everything butter linen & clothes were taken out, and are now under seal in the keeper’s custody. As a favour, we were then allowed to take our trunks with us to the ward assigned to us – in that ward we have continued since. It is the same in which Messrs Cork & Plunkett, the Wigan officers, are confined. We should have gone to the Common Misdemeanours ward, had we not, upon our arrival, undertaken to maintain ourselves, without putting the County to expense – I had 8? 5 1/2 about me when I came, so you may guess I had some courage to undertake my own maintenance. It so happens, however, that I did no reckon without my host. Thanks to the good people of Liverpool, I have had all my reasonable wants satisfied since I came here. They sent me two pounds when I was in Kirkdale and six pounds since I came here. Had it not been for them, I should be now wearing prison dress, living on felons’ fare, and picking cotton all day amongst thieves, house-breakers, sodomites & vagabonds of every sort.

            As to the rules & discipline we find them very oppressive, and they would be worse, had not the Wigan officers been here. Besides what I have already stated as to the locking up, and the inspection of letters – we are excluded from the use of pen, ink & paper – no newspapers, periodicals or books of any kind are allowed, save a few moral & religious books approved by the Chaplain.

p.4

We are not allowed to have even a pencil or a square inch of blank paper in our possession – we can write to our friends only once in 3 months, save for special favour from the Governor, and can see visitors only once in 3 months, save by social order of a magistrate. This rule applies even to a man’s wife. When we write, ’tis always under the inspection of an officer of the gaol and our letters are taken & examined by the Governor before they go off. No tobacco, snuff, or ??? ??? are allowed, but as a favour, we are allowed to buy a pint of porter or ale per day. The porter being execrably bad and the ale 4d per pint I take milk instead which is very cheap. Of course, no cards, chess, draughts or other game is allowed – no rackets, no ball-playing or play of any sort. Our ward is just 11 years long and 5 1/4 broad, beyond which we never stir, save to go to chapel when we have to pass through another ward about the same size. We attend chapel 8 times a week, which is just 8 times oftener than I <should> deserve to go. On Sundays, we have nearly 4 hours of it, so that it will be my own fault, if I do not turn out of this place a most religious dog. In short the only two things we can get here “without money and without price” are prayers and medicine, of which, thanks to Parson Rowley and the County-rates, we have a superabundance. By the way, talking of Parson Rowley, he is not a bad fellow. He has got leave (so he says) from the magistrates to let me have Blackstone’s Commentaries and Burn’s Justice – so I have written for them to London. So much for the rules of Lancaster Castle. We have written twice about them to the Magisterial Bench and have had an interview with them in ??? But they referred us to the Secretary of State, to whom we have not applied, only because we have been given to understand that (if we do) he will refer us back to the magistrates! To speak God’s truth this place would be intolerable were it not that we have a most excellent and humane man (Capt[ai]n Hansborough) for our governor. This discretion [in?] power is very limited, but as far as it goes, he gives us the full benefit of it, and, I believe, more. The two last Sundays he <has> allowed us to remain out of our cells ’til 8 o clock – he has allowed us to write 2 or 3 letters a week since I came here – not having once refused me or any other prisoner – and within the last 10 or 12 days he has allowed us a privilege altogether new here – the privilege of buying candles to take into our cells lighted when we get locked up. This is a great boon. It enables me to write the letter, and enables all of us to spend a few hours in reading which we should otherwise find very dull & heavy.

            Pray, write me a few lines when you receive this but without acknowledging it. I will write you again soon after and meanwhile, believe me to remain your most sincerely and affectionately, James Bronterre O’Brien