

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Motherhood Confined: Maternal Health in English Prisons, 1853 - 1955** *by Rachel E. Bennett*

Hardback, 202 pages  
Manchester University Press  
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This excellent book casts light on an overlooked aspect of England's penal history. Before the mid-19th Century, prisons contained an assortment of debtors, felons, men and women of all ages, petty and serious offenders, novices and recurrent jailbirds. It was anything but safe custody. Reform was overdue but the first prison in England devoted solely to women was only established in 1852-54. From then until 1955, when policy changed to transferring women out to a maternity facility to give birth, is the period covered. Pregnant women and nursing mothers posed especial challenges, which were seen as incidental, given very little official attention and at all times seemed secondary to the needs of the custodial regimes. The content covers the themes of the unmet health needs of women in prisons during this period, disregard of the special problems of pregnancy, challenges resulting from the presence of nursing infants in the prison conditions of the day and, by no means least, the legacy to the innocent child of being born in and spending infancy in prison.

The abiding message, threading through the century under review, is that the relevant issues had a very long history yet remained unresolved. All through the book there is recognition of the enormous disparity between the reports of enthusiastic officials and the reality on the ground. The extensive material studied included many Official Reports but very little from women prisoners themselves. Interestingly, the custody of Suffragettes and, later, of conscientious objectors and aliens in WW2 led to these more articulate women exposing more of the abuses and inhumanity.

Many female prisoners had serious health issues and the extreme regime of isolation and minimal communication engendered serious mental health issues. Diet was inadequate. All medical officers were men until well into the 20th century. By the early 20thC. there was recognition that lack of care in pregnancy was a serious problem and infringed the rights of women in custody. Many reports had recommended that women should be more prominent in the prison service; the first female Governor of Holloway, the largest women's prison, was not appointed until 1945.

It would have been interesting to know more about the women in custody: age distribution, types of crime and especially whether many were victims themselves. There are extensive references and bibliography, some helpfully classified into primary and secondary sources. As well as healthcare workers this book will appeal especially to those dealing with refugees, asylum seekers, homeless women and victims of abuse who share many of the same problems.

**Sheila L.B. Duncan**  
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