

The Woman Prison Officer

100 years ago

MOYA WOODSIDE

IN THE YEAR 1862, there were three female prisons in London: Millbank, Brixton, and Fulham Refuge. Millbank, a convict prison, received women who had committed serious crime, women whose behaviour was refractory, and the chronic recidivists; Brixton received the ordinary class and the elderly; while Fulham, for selected 'good-conduct' prisoners, provided industrial training before discharge. The daily average population was considerable: 470 at Millbank, 620 at Brixton, 174 at Fulham, a total of 1,264. At the two main institutions, the discipline staff, known in those days as Prison Matrons, numbered only 78. Their work was hard, their hours were long, their remuneration miserly.

Moved by compassion and indignation, a public-spirited gentleman named F. W. Robinson wrote an account of prison life, based on the reminiscences of a retired prison matron. His book, published in 1863*, depicts vividly the conditions under which prison staff worked, and pleads for recognition and improvement. From his pages, we glimpse something of the life led by these long-suffering prison matrons in their difficult and disagreeable task, caring for women in custody 100 years ago.

Recruitment and Salaries

In 1862, employment open to women was confined to a narrow range, largely domestic in character. Those with some education who

had to fend for themselves could only hope to become governesses, teachers, or ladies' companions: it seems that a few found their way into the prison service. 'The matrons', says Mr. Robinson, 'as a body are intelligent well-educated earnest young women, chiefly from that class which has seen better days and known happier times. Most of them had some sad story to tell of early orphanage, of improvident speculations that brought a family from affluence to beggary, of widowed mothers or sick sisters to support, of husbands who died early and left them with little children to work for'. For a few, a prison appointment meant improvement in social status. 'Now and then a lady's-maid, recommended by a mistress who had a friend on the Direction, or in the lady superintendent, used to pass muster, become one of the staff, and made as good a Government servant as the rest'.

A probationary period was required, but the author gives no information how long it lasted, nor any detail on the sort of training provided for candidates. He hints at favouritism in selection, and wants the standard of qualification raised ('even an illiterate being' he says, 'would occasionally work her way in'). The starting salary for an assistant prison matron was £95 a year, from which 3s. 4d. a month was deducted for uniform dress. The annual increment was £1. When promoted to matron, her

salary was £40 a year; and if she should rise to the heights of principal matron (equivalent to Chief Officer today) she earned £50 a year, with annual increment of 30s. 0d.

The Government, then as now, regarded themselves as model employers. 'Encouragement to persevere in their duties is freely offered to these Government servants' the author records, 'and a life pension awaits them at the end of ten years'. The work, however, was so trying, that few prison matrons appear to have had sufficient physical or nervous strength to stay the course even for that period. We are told of one who died, a very young woman, 'worn out with toil and anxiety for the reformation of her fallen sisterhood' and of others 'who depart from the service in a few years, aged and anxious looking, with no strength left for any new employment'.

Hours and Duties

The prison matrons were on duty for fifteen hours a day, from 6 a.m. till 9 or 10 p.m.: on alternate days they worked from 6 a.m. till 6 p.m., after which they were free. They had leave of absence every third Sunday, from early morning till 10 p.m.; if they returned even five minutes late, graduated deductions from salary were made. They had fourteen days holiday in the year—but (cruel provision) any previous days of sick leave were deducted from this brief respite. Such days of sick leave, the author notes, 'are unfortunately not few and far between—the hours being long and the service arduous'.

At Millbank, the day's routine began at 6 a.m. with unbolting the inner cell doors (cells in this prison had two doors, the outer one

formed of an iron grating). Cleaners were let out for early work, the rest of the women tidied and cleaned their cells. Breakfast, a pint of cocoa and a 4 oz. loaf of bread, was brought round at 7.30 a.m. by carriers. Work then started (coir picking, bag and shirt-making). This was carried on by each woman in her separate cell, with all conversation forbidden. At 9.15 a.m. the chapel bell rang for morning service at 9.45, each matron escorting her complement of prisoners there and back. Work continued till 12.45, when dinner was served. This consisted of 4 ozs. of boiled meat, $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. potatoes, and a 6 oz. loaf. After dinner work proceeded as before, 'only the voices of the matrons breaking the stillness of the prison'.

One hour each day was allowed for exercise in the airing yards, where the silent system was still enforced. Prisoners walked in Indian file round and round the yard, 'the matron keeping a careful watch on her flock of black sheep'. After the 'airing', the women worked again till 5.30 p.m. when they received a pint of gruel. Prayers were then read by a matron standing in the centre of each ward, so that her voice could be heard by the prisoners standing at their doors.

Work went on till 7.45 p.m. when scissors were collected; reading was allowed till 8.30 p.m., and at 8.45 p.m. the gas was turned out in the cells by the matron from outside. At 9 p.m., the matron on night duty appeared, and 'paced the prison for slow weary hours'.

Shortage of staff and frequent illness imposed extra duties on an already arduous day. One matron is recorded as locking and unlocking *six hundred times* a day, that is,

on her ward of fifty prisoners, she locked and unlocked each one twelve times. Another tedious duty was that of lighting the gas. Prisoners were given seven gas-papers at the beginning of each week. Every evening, the matron going down the ward, called out 'gas paper'. One was then passed out through the inspection hole in the door, lighted by the matron's candle, and drawn in again by the prisoner who was supposed to light her gas with it, the matron meanwhile having turned it on. (Needless to say, 'gas papers' were much in demand for writing messages to other prisoners, and many were the ruses to obtain an extra supply).

A particularly distressing duty was the haircutting of all new prisoners. This inexorable rule, enforced in the interests of cleanliness, provoked frequent scenes and struggles in Receptions (long tresses, in Victorian days, were esteemed as a 'woman's crowning glory'). The author recounts how women 'whose hearts had not quailed, perhaps, at the murder of their infants or the poisoning of their husbands, clasped their hands in horror at this sacrifice of their natural adornment—wept, begged, prayed, occasionally assumed a defiant attitude, resisted to the last, and were finally overcome only by force'. Sometimes the male guards had to be summoned from the gate to handcuff and hold down a violent cursing woman till the hair-cutting operation was complete. Such scenes must have been degrading to all concerned.

Escort, Discharge, and Visiting Duties

Escort work appears to have been limited to the transfer of

Millbank women to Brixton, or Brixton 'good-conduct' women to Fulham Refuge. The matron sat near the door of the omnibus, with a male guard stationed on the step outside. She was 'expected to watch the prisoners closely and restrain any excitability' while 'the equipage rattled away over Vauxhall Bridge and down the South Lambeth Road' on its way to Brixton. The author gives a touching picture of the whispered comments among the prisoners on glimpsing the outside world again, and commends the matrons for their humanity in pretending not to notice such breaches of the silence rule.

Humanity was also shown in that women who were sick or ill were not sent home unattended on discharge. A matron would escort them to their own door, even if a long railway journey were involved. Women discharged to homes outside London were escorted as routine to the appropriate railway station and put on the train. Although the matrons were glad to be witness of a woman's happiness when the long-awaited day arrived, this particular discharge duty, says the author, 'was not sought for in the least'. 'To rise an hour or an hour and a half before the usual early time for rising, and set forth in the raw morning, often the dense dark morning in the winter time, in a hired fly to the railway station, was not an enviable task; more particularly as the matron was expected to return by breakfast time and was put on full duty for the remainder of the day'.

Prison matrons were occasionally called upon to escort mad prisoners ('those whose minds had given way beneath the monotony of their position') to Fisherton Lunatic

Asylum near Salisbury. Although this escort employment was not the most agreeable, the rail journey to Salisbury *'was a change, valued as a set-off against the dark side of the expedition'*.

Visits of prisoners' relatives were less frequent than to-day. After six months at Millbank, the women were allowed to see their friends for twenty minutes once in three months, prisoner and visitor standing opposite each other behind wire-work screens, while the vigilant matron sat in the space between. Embarrassment, grief, jealousy, recrimination, attempts to communicate forbidden information—all these human reactions were familiar to matrons 'taking visits' 100 years ago. Of distressed relatives the author, a sensitive observer, remarks: 'The tears and sobs which they are unable to restrain affect the watcher more than is generally imagined. It is very difficult to become accustomed to this portion of a principal matron's duty—the office is unenviable'.

Troublesome Prisoners

Prison life 100 years ago was one of almost unendurable monotony. Dull deadening work, such as picking oakum, carried on in the individual cells; no 'association'; no conversation; no evening classes or other distractions; no prison libraries. A quarter of the entire population in Millbank in 1862 were illiterate, another quarter 'can read only', and the remainder had but imperfect schooling. There was no segregation of prisoners suspected to be mad; murderous attacks and suicidal attempts on the part of crazed women were yet another hazard of the prison matron's post. It is hardly surprising that in circumstances of such

repression and boredom, 'breakings out' were a daily occurrence. Refractory women indulged in 'smash-ups', tearing everything in sight, banging, shouting and swearing for hours on end.

These wild half-demented prisoners were punished for their outbreaks by confinement in the 'dark' cells. Disturbing scenes must have ensued: the author observes 'the strength of some of these women, during their fits of frenzy, is greatly in excess of the men's'. It always required two, and very often three, of the male guards to 'force one fighting plunging woman from her cell to the 'dark', tables and bedsteads snapping under their hands like splinters of firewood'. Millbank Prison possessed six 'dark' cells, windowless, with perforated gratings for air. They were firmly secured with 'formidable doors', and an outer sliding pad which was supposed to stifle the uproarious sounds. The furniture consisted of 'a slanting series of boards by way of a bedstead, with an uncomfortable wooden block for a pillow'. At night the woman was given a pair of blankets and a rug (often found torn to shreds in the morning). The diet was bread and water. Three days of such confinement was usually sufficient to exhaust even the strongest of prisoners, but some were so confined for several weeks. Even canvas jackets and handcuffs were used to restrain the most refractory.

The author deplores what he calls 'this remnant of the barbarous style of coercion peculiar to the Middle Ages'. 'I cannot say', he observes, 'that these 'darks' have ever produced in any single instance a salutary effect upon the prisoners'. The matrons suffered

too, since 'with an ingenious perversion of common humanity' some of the 'dark' cells were placed either above, below or beside the Matron's quarters. At Millbank one such cell was immediately below; and the tired officer was often kept awake all night by the incessant shrieking, hammering, kicking, or by 'the defiant song of the caged tigress', which welled up from below.

Very little medical help appears to have been given to the prison matrons in managing these violent refractory prisoners, and there was great reluctance to pronounce any one insane. The author criticises the prison surgeons and physicians for this attitude which, he says, 'leads occasionally to horrible scenes in our prisons' and indeed may endanger the life of the officers. Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, opened the following year in 1863, at last provided a suitable institution for the mentally deranged in custody.

Conditions and Complaints

What could the prison matrons do to improve their lot? Very little, it seems. In common with other women workers of that period, they were unorganised, had no associations to protect their interest, and—should they fall ill or unemployed—no means of support other than recourse to charity or Poor Law out-door relief. Few dared to complain. Not only was their labour exploited, but bad food ('decidedly and disgracefully bad') was provided in the matrons' mess-rooms. At times protests were made, but these were brushed aside by the steward saying he saw nothing wrong with the meat ('oily beef and goatish mutton'). The ladies were being too fastidious.

On another occasion, the surgeon was solicited for his verdict and he 'fell into raptures over a plateful of mutton which had made half the matrons sick'.

Prison matrons, 'were always considered in the wrong, and complaints of this nature were regarded in a light almost impertinent'. Attempts were made, the author records, 'to memorialise the authorities' on this and other grievances, but 'the nervousness with which strong measures are generally regarded has always interfered with the project, some refusing to sign because of fear of dismissal'. In many instances 'there are mothers, sisters, little children to support' and the matrons must endure all evils rather than run any risk.

Some efforts to provide change or recreation for the matrons' off-duty hours are mentioned, but met with small response. 'Reading rooms have been thought of, and abandoned' the author reports. At Brixton the experiment was tried of a little music, in a room across the yard. But (deplorable development) 'the music led to a quadrille now and then, and it was thought advisable to send the piano back to the maker, and rescind the privilege'. Then, as now, the staff preferred to spend their free time outside the walls—'their craving, when health and strength permit, to pass beyond the gates and shake the prison dust from their feet'.

Official visitors to the prison often appear to have regarded the matrons on a par with domestic servants, and were 'awkward and embarrassed' when they found they could not leave a tip with the attendant who had shown them round. Acceptance of any such fee

was strictly forbidden. 'The offer of money to the officers of our Government prisons is an act which brings an indignant blush to their cheeks, and makes their fingers itch to box the ears of the would-be donor'. Nor was it unknown for prisoners' relatives on visiting days to 'make delicate hints that money will be forthcoming', if required, in return for the concessions of any little favour to the prisoner concerned. 'The more disreputable class of these visitors appear to consider this offer as a temptation which even a prison matron has not the power to withstand'. But withstand they did, thanks to their ladylike upbringing and their dedication to the prison service.

Their champion, Mr. Robinson, devotes his final chapter to a plea for better treatment for the down-trodden female staff, and links this with the improvement of prison discipline generally. 'The staff of matrons is *not* sufficient for the proper working of our female prisons' he roundly declares. It has never been sufficient, and the officers are worked too hard. Fifteen hours a day are too many. This even though 'the Direction acknowledges that the superintendence of female convicts forms the most trying feature of prison experience'.

'Female prisoners must be treated individually', he goes on. When more attention can be paid to each woman, instead of to each class, results more satisfactory will be arrived at. The whole principle of discipline is to lead, not to drive; therefore it is necessary that prison matrons should be carefully selected from 'thoughtful earnest women, possessed of discretion and judgment'. Among his other

reformist ideas are a change of name for women prison officers. 'Officer' he says, is too masculine, 'matron' a misnomer; both names convey an impression of harshness and ugliness. He thinks that 'sisters', if this did not suggest the nunnery so strongly, would be the most appropriate designation—'sisters in their interest for those poor creatures who are confided to their care'.

Mr. Robinson wants lectures on divers subjects, 'calculated to interest and distract a prisoner's mind', to be delivered to the female convicts in prison. He wants the removal of 'the worst class of prisoner' to a separate establishment, and an observation ward for the segregation of the mentally unsound. His concluding request (which has a very contemporary ring) is for a Government grant to the Prisoners' Aid Society. If the good effects of the society's work could be rendered still more comprehensive, the number of 'returns' and re-convictions would, he is sure, continue to diminish.

Women prison officers today still have a difficult and demanding job; but their conditions (even though recommended for further improvement†) and the general atmosphere in which they work are incomparably different from those described in Mr. Robinson's book. Many changes must have followed its publication: gratitude is due to this unknown Victorian gentleman who so eloquently pleaded the cause of women prison staff (and women prisoners) 100 years ago.

* *Female Life in Prison*. F. W. Robinson, London. Spencer Blackett, 1863.

† The Wynn Parry Report, 1958.