

Under Lock and Key

A Study of Women in Prison

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WHAT! ANOTHER BOOK on prisons? That could be the normal reaction of those who have noticed the glut of literature on this subject over the last few years, books by ex-prisoners, books by experts. The author of this book is neither an ex-prisoner nor would she claim to be an expert. She has simply drawn from a wealth of experience gained from long association with the prison system and particularly from mixing with staff and prisoner alike behind the walls of H. M. Prison for Women at Holloway.

Mrs. Field has in no way set herself the task of writing a prison text book. She has described the existing system "not for its own sake, but to show how it might be changed." Her main purpose (one could almost call it a "mission") in writing the book is to draw attention to their (the women prisoners') particular situation.

Before writing about women actually in prison the author tries first to sift the reasons for bringing them there. The reasons for crime. A complex question if ever there was one! Without exception, every time I have addressed an audience on "Crime and the Treatment of the Offender" someone

has asked "How do you account for the increase in crime in recent years?" Is there a straightforward answer to such a question? Can one put a finger on this or that and say specifically that here is the reason? Danish research on the subject would claim "failure" as one of the basic reasons for crime. Mrs. Field has found in her experience that a number of women prisoners are from broken homes and slums, often underprivileged and with a background of insecurity from early years. She suggests that in the past we may not have been looking in the right direction in seeking a solution to the problem for "we have only recently begun to study the link between mind and deeds and the emotional disturbances and aims that go to make up the criminal personality."

The reader gathers from this book some interesting facts which are perhaps well known to those who have to deal with the offender, but not so well known to the general public unless they take it upon themselves to read the Prison Department's Annual Report. The number of women serving prison sentences is much fewer than men

and, few women serve long sentences. Mrs. Field claims that the shame of a prison sentence affects women more than men, but on the whole when sent to prison, the woman feels a sense of injury rather than regret. "There is very seldom an expression of remorse." As selfishness is, I think, the basic problem of the offender one does not expect to find remorse and one is surprised when a genuine cry of remorse is heard!

Mrs. Field is at her best when describing the types of woman prisoner. I am one with her in her "sneaking sympathy with the prostitutes' sense of grievance." They often proved, in my opinion, "good" prisoners, but were never in long enough to effect any real rehabilitation. The author also knows something of the "social heirarchy of prison life." This was brought vividly home to me when a prostitute who attended Church regularly while inside, applied to be excused Church attendance. When I enquired the reason for this she exclaimed that when attending Church she found herself placed in a pew with all those b thieves!

The problem of the young offender who becomes a young prisoner is a challenge to all genuinely interested in crime and the treatment of the offender. What can be done to prevent them offending and, if they must be sent to prison, what best can be done for them and with them? Mrs. Field, as one would expect, is

greatly concerned about this problem. She realises there is a genuine attempt to keep young women under 21 out of prison altogether, but if they come to prison a wing at Holloway or any other local prison is not a suitable place to house them however much we try to segregate them from adult prisoners.

Mrs. Field is against the short sentence and would like to see it abolished altogether. The short sentence prisoner upsets the routine of prison life and it is a waste of time as little or nothing can be done to help the offender during a short stay. Mrs. Field has experience of the Bench and she rightly points out that often enough the Judge has little alternative to awarding a short sentence. There must be found then a suitable alternative. The author would like to see the law amended to enable a parole system instituted. Now we come to what for Mrs. Field is the "heart of the matter." She suggests something along the American lines—prisoners released from prison after part of their sentence has been served. Of course, they would still be under supervision and would be required to conform to special conditions during that supervision. If they failed to conform then a return to prison would be the inevitable result.

A system such as Mrs. Field suggests could well work in this country. Its success would depend on many factors. Mrs. Field suggests two:

1. A right selection of prisoners.
2. An efficient parole supervision.

"Experts would be on a parole Board," but I would not exclude those who are working in daily contact with the prisoner. I suggest this would be a contributory factor in the successful running of the system.

The success of a parole system would depend on two things at least:

1. Stringent conditions of parole.
2. An intensive form of after-care.

Mrs. Field cites these two and gives good reason for insisting upon them. "The first" she says, "to ensure that those placed on parole would neither abscond nor fall into further crime" and this can only be safeguarded by conscientious and dedicated parole officers who would need to visit the homes of the paroled as frequently as possible.

In her plea for the abolition of short sentences and the introduction of the parole system, Mrs. Field makes her strongest point when she writes about the overwhelming advantages. "No longer would the family of small children be handed over to the care and guardianship of a local authority at immense monetary cost while the mother was serving a three month sentence."

In Part II of her book Mrs. Field deals adequately with the type of prisons. I couldn't agree with her

more than when, in her chapter on borstals, she refers to the closing of Aylesbury as a borstal for girls and the dispatching of the girls to Durham and Cardiff. It was a shame that those in authority were forced to make this decision because of the increase in the number of boys being sent to borstal training at that particular time. But it was surprising how those girls eventually settled down, particularly in the wing at Durham, and I well remember the many tears shed by them when they had to leave to take up residence at the new establishment at Bullwood!

Part III of the book deals with Administration and has chapters on Medicine, Physical Welfare, Education and Work.

Anyone who has read books by ex-prisoners will know how bitter they can be against the Prison Medical Service. Yet on the whole I think this is unjust. I would acknowledge with Mrs. Field that there is much to be done within the Service but until adequate facilities can be provided there will always be room for complaint. However, there is a large building programme being carried out at most of our local prisons providing more up-to-date accommodation and equipment. The need is urgent and none would voice this more than the medical staff who at present have little elbow room wherein to practice.

In her chapter on "The Mind," Mrs. Field has a paragraph which needs repeating again and again

and taken to heart from the Governor to the newly appointed Prison Officer. It is this—"All women (and I would add men) need some help. The problem is to sort out the available treatment and to send the right prisoner to the right source of treatment. In a way simply befriending, human sympathy, raising morale and planning for the future are just as necessary as, if not more so, than the highly esoteric techniques."

Mrs. Field briefly touches upon "Group Counselling" and draws a comparison between the American and our system. Group Counselling originated in California and has only recently been practised in this country. While it is the work of experts in America, our system, suggests Mrs. Field, is run by novices. But let it be stated in all fairness that it was only introduced in the first place in this country in order "to build up a better relationship between prisoner and prison officer."

The method is challenged by Xenia Field for she realises its psychological and emotional dangers and knows it gives great scope to the exhibitionists. But in spite of that she thinks it all worth while on the grounds that it does relieve tension.

There is a short chapter on Education and it is gratifying to know that the author approves of the appointment of a full-time tutor-organiser. Mrs. Field's chief complaint under this heading is

that the "higher intelligent are not catered for" and even the "average intellect" are neglected. The last word on this important subject by Mrs. Field is that a lot of money has been spent on it and to see that it is doing its job more supervision is needed by an outside committee. For her, "the whole question of education in prisons and borstals needs examination."

The Local Authority teachers have a difficult task and many are dedicated men and women. I think they do their best with the material they have to work with and every encouragement ought to be given to them.

Mrs. Field trots out the old arguments and vexed questions when she tackles the subject of work in prisons. It is surprising the number of people who think there is an easy solution to this problem. Mrs. Field thinks it has not been tackled adequately and calls for experts at the top and not amateurs as we now have. She is under the impression that the whole approach to prison work is "half-hearted and lacks direction".

While I believe Mrs. Field has a point to make here and she makes it fair and square without pulling any punches she is perhaps being unfair to those like Mr. Albert Healey, who have not spared themselves in trying to bring new and interesting industries into our prisons during recent years. The solution to the problem is not an easy one and we must thank Mrs. Field for challenging us with it

again in a fresh and invigorating way. Those of us who have seen day in day out some of the dull and unproductive work carried out by numbers of men and women in our prisons must nod the head in agreement when we read in this book such phrases as "satisfying work is almost as important as decent hygiene and reasonable food," and "lack of occupation is liable to turn an active woman into a lazy one." Mrs. Field goes as far as to say that "any reasonable cost in setting prisoners to work in terms of rehabilitation is humanely and economically justified." Who would disagree with her?

On the Chaplain and his work in prison Mrs. Field has some very pointed remarks and yet one cannot altogether quibble with her on this score. She realises (and don't we all!) that prison work is specialised and not all clergymen are suitable for it. She also realises the isolation of the chaplain in his prison parish and she makes the interesting suggestion (which has been put forward by others) that experienced and proven chaplains should be charged with the supervision of different zones.

May we pray (and I hope Mrs. Field will join us) that God will supply our prisons with "men of zeal and devotion with a true belief in humanity."

Although the author realises that the purpose of her book was "not to follow the prisoner beyond the prison gate" I am glad she decided to add a chapter on hostels.

Those experienced in after-care fully realise that although men leaving prison are, on the whole, fairly well catered for as far as hostel accommodation is concerned, women and girls are not. "The shortage of suitable working-girls' hostels is an urgent matter, because, what happens during the immediate days after release is of vital importance." One of the gravest problems, especially in the North, is the fixing up of women and girls with accommodation on release. The sooner good hostels and the right people to run them become available the better.

Although Mrs. Field has pointed out that it is "well nigh impossible to rehabilitate the prisoner while in captivity, what little can be done will be wasted if there is not an efficient after-care service on release. The providing of suitable hostels must become a main plank in this service.

No one would argue with Mrs. Field in her summing up that her book gives a true picture of the woman prisoner and her life in prison. No doubt the woman prisoner is not an easy subject for study, but the author has been in a unique position to give a true picture and to make such a study. We are grateful for her effort, for this book will be read with interest and deference by all who know the author and share her sympathies and understanding.

Under Lock and Key — by XENIA FIELD.

Parrish. 30s. 0d.