

## Twelve Months, Mrs. Brown

THIS BOOK differs from others of its kind in that it is written by a former member of staff rather than by an ex-inmate and as such, more credence will be lent to it.

Apart from the interest taken in it by the general public, prison staffs will also find it readable, not only from the angle of what the writer has to say about women in prison, but because the style of writing reflects to a considerable degree the author's quality of incandescence which carries the reader with unerring skill through the gamut of emotions experienced by a woman finding herself in prison for the first time.

No one would attempt to deny the apprehension of anyone in such circumstances, or fear of the unknown in what lay before her. No mention is made however, of the fact that every woman is seen by a representative of the W.V.S. while still in Receptions and that this member has the authority to deal with any immediate problem as an emergency. This in itself is reassuring to a certain extent and alleviates anxiety about family and children, or any other urgent domestic problem.

Mrs. Brown's sufferings were mostly those of her own imagination played upon by the more unscrupulous, and it becomes

obvious as the book unfolds that she learned not only what, but whom to avoid, and that people are not selected for prison but are there as a result of their own actions.

The disparity of her concise thought and speech (especially at the end of the book when she harangues the Governor in the discharge interview) are incompatible with the lack of intelligence and foresight which involved her in the financial debacle with which she was charged. Interesting too, to note that of all the characters, Mrs. Brown was the only one to be portrayed sympathetically. Does this infer that prisons are full of people less in need of sympathy and support, guidance and training, than the hire purchase defaulter?

Nothing could be further from the truth. While the old lag, the prostitute, psychopath and the congenital thief are there, the majority are ordinary people and inadequates who cannot face up to circumstances or their problems. The theories propounded in Chapter 16 are novel to say the very least. Whether they would be acceptable to an enlightened society—or provide further incentive to the "springers" with all the techniques of modern plastic surgery and other resources to hand is another matter entirely.

At this point in the book, there is the feeling of being left in mid-air, so to speak. The argument between the characters is not finally resolved. Could conviction in the "positive remedies" claimed be lacking?

What will concern prison staffs is the exaggerated description of conditions that the book will convey to the public and which do not now exist. For the purpose of the book, it is obvious that the author's experience as an officer at Winson Green and later as Assistant Governor at Holloway are combined. The former closed long ago for women and radical changes took place in Holloway almost simultaneously with the author's departure. Much that is written is therefore invalid.

The modern techniques of the Norwich Scheme and Group Counselling were introduced at Holloway and extended where possible throughout the prison, but these changes were nothing compared with what was to come. In 1962, a modern semi-secure prison based on the house system was opened at Styal in Cheshire. The training here is to impose upon the women more personal responsibility and to equip them to face society on discharge with confidence. The population of Holloway will also move in the not too distant future to a similar establishment in the south, and the plans for these were probably on the drawing board long before

the idea of *Twelve Months Mrs. Brown* was conceived.

Thus, Holloway, Strangeways and Winson Green will have faded into obscurity and with them the inheritance of Victoriana—for which neither the former Prison Commission, Governor nor staffs were responsible but which was the substance of Miss Smith's *Cri de cœur*—breathtaking changes indeed within the span of officers' service today as compared with the centuries taken to achieve any appreciable reform.

A new Centre will open shortly in the north for remands, while Grendon Underwood will cater for those needing specialized treatment. Thus, we look to the future with hope and not for retrograde steps such as advocated in the book.

For the rest, it is a matter for regret that the staff were so caricatured and unkindly depicted, while the picture of the Governor was ludicrous! Prison service today is a social work of a high order, and all, from Governors down, do a difficult job cheerfully and there is certainly no time for poses such as were described. The basic grade officers are young women with a zest for life and an interest in their job—there is incidentally, a considerable marriage wastage—and there is always room for recruits.

I.C.

*Twelve Months, Mrs Brown* by

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