

Review Ann Schwan, *Convict Voices* by Helen Rogers

Anne Schwan, *Convict Voices: Women, Class, and Writing about Prison in Nineteenth-Century England* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014

Felicia Skene, author and philanthropist, sketched her recollections of working as a prison visitor at Oxford Gaol, serialised in *Blackwoods Magazine* before publication as *Scenes from a Silent World, or, Prisons and Their Inmates* (1889). Her evocative title captures many of the themes in Anne Schwan's important study that explores the cultural fascination with the woman prisoner in the nineteenth century. How can we 'retrieve' the voices of women convicts, and the experiences which lay behind them when, following the prison reforms of the early Victorian years, inmates were subjected to silent discipline, with access to them tightly regulated? The journalist Henry Mayhew was not permitted to interview them for his study the *Criminal Prisons of London* (1862), and so it's only through its haunting illustrations of inmates, drawn from photographs by John Binny, that we—and contemporary readers—can imagine 'inside' from the perspectives of prisoners. Rather than investigating the penal archive for evidence of female voices, therefore, Schwan turns to the many cultural responses to the woman convict, showing through detailed, nuanced explorations, that these were often multi-vocal, rich in meaning, and even amenable to a 'proto-feminist' reading.

Schwan begins with the gallows broadsides and 'last lamentations' that had long entertained popular audiences. As other scholars have shown, these affordable single sheets used by the poor to decorate their homes, incorporated a range of illustrations and voices, from judge and chaplain to the condemned woman herself. Though much of their content was concocted, they foregrounded the condemned subject and, claims Schwan, 'some of the most interesting explorations of female convict voices and psychology can indeed be found in noncanonical literary forms' (26). In one especially rich example, 'The Life, Trial, Confession and Execution of Martha Browning' (included in this well-illustrated book), the condemned woman is even shown sitting at a writing desk, weeping over the Bible, ink and letters before her, and moved to confession, it is implied, by 'The Lamentations of a Sinner' pasted on her cell wall (21-2). Although penitence provided the conventional framework for these 'female voices', last lamentations often alluded to the social pressures that drove women to fatal acts: desertion, male violence, and poverty. Addressing women readers, in the guise of warning, this popular reconstruction of a female public voice, evoked a sense of 'collectivity', shared female experience and 'proto-feminist concerns', argues Schwan. Occasionally a defiant voice was articulated that may have offered female readers transgressive pleasure: "'Shame you are not going to hang me!'" Was the broadside murderess, Schwan might have asked, the common reader's 'madwoman in the attic'?

While Schwan is not the first to identify the rhetorical airing of social injustice in broadsides, what she does show is how their 'proto-feminist' themes were extended in a public conversation played out in journalism, fictionalized memoirs, novels and

prisoner autobiographies. The female prisoner—as brutalized outcast and reclaimed woman—was depicted throughout the century as the archetypal recipient of female benevolence, accompanying numerous heroic depictions of Elizabeth Fry, the original model for Victorian women’s social mission. Typically, in cultural works and activist writing, the philanthropic do-gooder ‘saves’ the abandoned convict but, in the prison scenes between preacher Dinah and ‘fallen woman’ Hetty in *Adam Bede* (1859), Schwan argues George Eliot retrieved an earlier model of Methodist prison labour and ‘working-class intersubjectivity’, famously inspired by her own aunt. More commonly, the convict woman hovers at the margins of Victorian fiction, and requires attentive reading to excavate her narrative, literally so in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) where the suicide letter of ex-convict Rosanna Spearman is buried with her in the shifting quick sand. Voices from the margins—like Rosanna who complains life ‘at the reformatory’, where she was made ‘to feel my own degradation’ (83), is harder than being a thief—can be darker and more disruptive of class and gender discourse than the narratives of central protagonists like Hetty or—later Hardy’s Tess (1891)—who must display humble femininity if readers are to sympathize with them as victims. Future research might explore how (and how often) the former prisoner was depicted in Victorian culture and whether their troubled or diffident voices could challenge conventional reclamation narratives.

In chapters devoted to prison memoirs Schwan provides surprising evidence of the cultural reach of prisoner testimony, as in the widely-reviewed and popular series by fiction-writer Frederick William Robinson, purportedly based on the recollections of ‘A Prison Matron’: *Female Life in Prison* (1862), *Memoirs of Jane Cameron: Female*

Convict (1863), and *Prison Characters Drawn from Life with Suggestions for Prison Government* (1866). While the identity of the former government servant has not been verified, contemporaries clearly read these works as real-life memoirs; Harriet Martineau reviewed Mary Carpenter's *Our Convicts* alongside *Memoirs of Jane Cameron* for the *Edinburgh Review* (1865). The Prison Matron's exposures of the structural inequalities underlying crime and prison work as one of the few, low paid jobs open to women, were taken up by feminist activists, including Bessie Rayner Parkes in *English Woman's Journal* (1862). Moving on from the sensationalist narratives of the condemned woman, the series follow inmates after release not just their backstories, to provide readers, suggests Schwan, 'with a history of emotions from below – a history of the experiences (imagined but not necessarily that far from actual, lived experience) of an incarcerated individual rarely recorded elsewhere' (53). They were too, perhaps the first works to portray 'romantic friendships' between convicts or 'palling-in', and thus offer material for the 'intersubjectivity' of prisoners and 'a hidden lesbian history (53).

Three chapters examine better-known prisoner autobiographies by women that contributed to late Victorian and Edwardian considerations of female confinement, in both personal and collective campaigns for emancipation: those of spiritualist Susan Willis Fletcher, Florence Maybrick, and suffragettes like Constance Lytton. The chapter on suffrage memoirs includes less well-known material, however, such as the drawings and diary kept secretly in Holloway by suffragette Katie Gliddon. Schwan is alert throughout to the intersections of class and gender and the ambivalent ways higher-class and political women prisoners related to 'common'

felons. Perhaps Schwan could have made more of the striking shift from the gothic and melodramatic in earlier depictions of female confinement to the realist sketches of prison and prisoners by Gliddon and Sylvia Pankhurst that highlight the hard labour and endurance of all inmates.

Throughout, Schwan combines a feminist agenda with a Foucauldian approach to excavate the 'insurrection of subjected knowledge' concealed by dominant discourse. In a startling comment in her account of 'wrongful' imprisonment, Florence Maybrick reveals how the prisoner's own truth can collide painfully even with those who champion her cause. She describes her reluctance to bare her soul: "I was told to look at myself objectively; then to pry into myself subjectively; then to regard both in their relation to the outside world—to describe how this, that, or the other affected me; in short, as one of them, more deep in science than others, expressed it, 'We want as much as possible of the psychology of your prison life'" (134). Maybrick's concern, Schwan notes should alert us to the political complications of prison autobiography and the idea that 'telling your story' can be unequivocally empowering, for according to Foucault, "'the soul" is "the effect and instrument of a political anatomy," rather than simply a site of freedom' (135). But rather than reject contemporary prison writing programmes, as do some proponents of the prison abolition movement, Schwan draws on Foucault's prison activism and her own involvement in prisoner education, with classes bringing together students in the Scottish Prison Service and Edinburgh Napier University, to advocate a critically-informed pedagogy (see 'Reading and Writing in Prison', special issue of

Critical Survey 23.3 (December 2011). This thoughtful and insightful study is equally shaped by the same politically committed critical practice.

Helen Rogers, Liverpool John Moores University (h.rogers@ljmu.ac.uk)

Note on contributor

Helen Rogers is a Reader in Nineteenth Century Studies at Liverpool John Moores University where she and students produce the website *Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession, 1700-1900* www.prisonvoices.org. She has written widely on crime, punishment and rehabilitation and blogs about her book-in-progress, *Conviction: Stories from a Nineteenth-Century Prison*, at www.convictionblog.com (@HelenRogers19c).