

Bio:

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Susanna Menis: A History of Women's Prisons in England. The Myth of Prisoners Reformation. Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, ISBN: 978-1-5275-4183-2.

A History of Women's Prisons in England is a thought-provoking, authentic, and illuminating criminological deep dive into the historical development of English female prisons; it responds to scholarship requests, such as by Zender (2002) and Gelsthorpe (2004), to pay greater attention to the history of the female offender. Dr Menis provides a thorough historical analysis of the reasons, narratives and policies that have led to the establishment of the modern prison penalty. However, instead of having the male prisoner (or gender-less imaginative individual (Naffine, 1997)) as the main actor, Menis shifts the focus onto women. By doing so, she attempts to challenge the claim that women have been invisible in criminal justice policy and that, instead, the invisibility stems from criminologists' failure to fully engage with historical primary sources (pp. 1-4). As Zedner (1994, p. 100) argued, 'to suggest that women prisoners were simply "not foreseen" is patently implausible'.

The first part of the timeline of Menis' historical examination starts in the mid-eighteenth century with the courts' dissatisfaction with capital punishment and the difficulties presented by the more favoured penalty of transportation; the examination culminates with the disappointing work by the Prison Commission towards the end of the nineteenth century (part II). This part of the study revises several previous assertions by literature (Heidensohn and Silvestri, 2012); it evidences that the female prison population during the nineteenth century was not subject to the same prison administration as the men. Then, the analysis shifts its attention to the first quarter of the twentieth century, investigating the 'training' policy and the birth of the open prison (part III) and revealing how legislation was responsible for the downfall of prisons' management. The final part of the monograph focuses on the historical development of the first female open prison, Askham Grange.

The monograph is relatively short. The title only reflects one of the book's main three parts, making the history of women's prisons somewhat brief. This would not have been a concern if it were not for Menis highlighting how other histories of women's prisons had also been very short (p. 27). The succinct history, however, is compensated by a detailed analysis, where the strength of the work lies in the wealth of the primary sources used. Menis acknowledges that her research 'emulate(s) those newer approaches that [...] have been affected by the opening of archives to the public (both on-site and online), allowing the widening and deepening of critical examination of sources' (p. 28). Menis draws attention in *Prison Historiography* (part I), to the ways prison histories have been written, shedding light on the implications of this on knowledge production; Menis indicates that:

[...] the aim of such a review is to reveal to the reader that 'reality' might depend upon the type of 'story' told or, alternatively, that 'reality could be a combination of different 'stories', outlooks, standpoints, beliefs, and ideals. However, the sum of these historiographies cannot provide a complete account of prison history because there are as many prison histories as there are people who have left their mark- in one way or another, virtually or physically- on the walls of English prisons (p. 12).

Menis' inspiration to write a revisionist prison history (book cover) does not seem to be driven by the classic *Discipline and Punish* by Foucault (1979), where she appears to be critical of it (p. 22). Rather, her approach follows reflections by, for example, Howe (1994), Naffine (1997), and Spongberg (2002) on the need to move away from the established mainstream framework of analysis that usually posits men (males) as their point of reference, urging the need to 'assert women's historical subjectivity and to question masculinist historiography' (p. 23). Menis is aware (conclusion), however, that the history of female prisons is intertwined with the history of their male counterparts, and that their stories cannot always be separated. This is apparent in part III, when she analyses, for example, the drafting of the 'training' prison policy, when it only becomes gender specific at the point of policy implementation.

The text is a welcome addition to the history of female prisons. However, although having at its core this objective, the monograph reflects more aptly the second part of the title, namely, *The Myth of Prisoners' reformation*. The value of Menis' research goes beyond the mere investigation of the development of the modern prison penalty and the open prison; significantly, the analysis provides consistent historical evidence to what has become a 'matter of fact' contemporary perception- that prisons do not work (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2023). Menis builds on her perspective of 'the myth of reformation' drawing strongly on Pat Carlen's *carceral clawback* (2002, pp. 7-9). This approach is refreshing as it focuses on policy and its application, allowing effective reflection on contemporary penal practice. Menis demonstrates why this is the case from an institutional and policy position rather than an evaluation of reoffending rates and crime trends (Medlicott, 2012). This analysis is threaded throughout the monograph, and it is particularly enlightening in the discussion on the open prison.

The monograph reveals one particularly surprising finding that prison scholarship does not appear to have addressed previously- that the English modern prison penalty was set as an experiment, not in a scientific context, rather as a temporary measure. Imprisonment as a primary penalty was only meant to replace temporary transportation until the limitations on this would have been lifted (p. 49). According to Menis, the failure to predict that transportation would never be reinstated led the government to take a somewhat blasé approach to the alternative- prisons- thus driving an ungrounded theoretical framework on this penalty (p. 53). From a practitioner's point of view, this perspective, as illustrated through instances showcasing *carceral clawback*, for example the

contribution by Elizabeth Fry (p. 63), taps into issues faced by current prison policy, too (Bromley briefings, 2023).

Part IV of the text significantly contributes to the thin research on open prisons (see recent research by Waite, 2023). However, the monograph's title does not suggest this theme, risking this study to disappear into the vast body of prison scholarship. The introduction suggests (p. 13) that Menis has conducted fieldwork and interviews at HMP Askham Grange, but this study is predominantly historical and theoretical rather than empirical. Given that Askham Grange is taken as a case study, this approach is perhaps more helpful for practitioners when reflecting on current policy in more generic terms (Haddon et al., 2015). Menis explains that:

Although the open prison is analysed in its own right, the study critically considers the role and function of the open prison within the wider context of the prison system and how the open prison has been affected by the orthodox closed prison (p. 13).

Ultimately, Menis revisits the historical challenges to the prison penalty through a critical historical lens. Significantly, she traces why the prison penalty is how it is, making an implicit, albeit significant, connection between past and present.

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