



Elaine Farrell, *Women, Crime and Punishment in Ireland: Life in the Nineteenth-Century Convict Prison*, (Cambridge, 2020).

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Megan Yates

Abstract

Women, Crime and Punishment in Ireland is a detailed resource which expands upon the existing scholarship of prison life and brings the administration of punishment in an Irish female convict prison into particular focus. Scholars have recently begun to reflect on how the implementation of nineteenth-century laws (such as the English Poor Laws) affected the wider lives of those inside an institution and this has been conducted through an analysis of the agency that imprisoned women showed in the face of increasingly punitive legislation.

Biography: Megan Yates is an ESRC PhD Student in the school of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. Her project is collaborative, working closely with the University of Nottingham and the National Archives. In her doctoral research, she focuses on the daily experiences of vagrants within the workhouses of the nineteenth century and across the Midlands.

In this heavily researched book, Elaine Farrell effectively synthesises studies around life in nineteenth-century institutions with new understandings of the selfhood, agency and life cycles that her female convicts displayed.¹ Through the lives of Irish female convicts, the author conducts a thorough examination of Irish prison life, families, friendships, relationships, and wider network acquisition. It is in these places, Grangegorman, Mountjoy Female Penitentiary, and the Cork Female Convict Depot, that Farrell explores the experiences of incarcerated women and their interwoven identities inside and outside of the prison walls.

Farrell's case studies detailing the convictions, treatment and opinions of these women will be a great resource for multiple branches of history, both in the institutional sense of how life in an Irish convict prison worked for these females, as well as for those studying the detailed experiences and lifecycles of people in nineteenth-century institutions.

Farrell's focus also contributes more broadly to discourse surrounding crime and punishment, particularly the evolution of western punitive practices as she explores in her introduction the administrative pathway from Grangegorman prison to Cork Female Convict Depot. Her exploration of these prison institutions to some extent accords with Foucault's examination of prison in *Discipline and Punish* and his suggestion that imprisonment was part of a much bigger carceral system that, Farrell thus goes on to argue, infiltrated every aspect of the lives researched in her case studies.²

The incorporation of Irish women is a novel and impressive approach to the study of lived experiences and the positionality of her complicated case studies within the context of Ireland, politically, socially and culturally. The source base for this work combines both traditional and non-traditional resources as it utilises the official record of court transcripts, prison ledgers, annual reports and legislation, alongside personal testimony and inmate letters. Farrell uses a close reading

¹ For example, *Rebellious Writing: Contesting Marginalisation in Edwardian Britain*, ed. by Lauren Alex O'Hagan, *Writing and Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2020).

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Peregrine Books, Repr (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

analysis to unpick the rhetoric of these sources and interprets them through her vast knowledge of the Irish penal system in the mid-late Victorian era. She combines her analyses with other historical works for both Irish and British institutions and this marries her work with historiography on the Poor Laws including broad ideas about imprisonment, settlement and resistance.³

Farrell employs a case-study approach to her sources through sub-chapters at the beginning of each main chapter which brings the human element to the front of her discussion. This structure takes the reader on a journey, an effective approach which envelopes the somewhat disjointed and difficult excerpts of narrative with the social circumstances of these women's lives. It makes sense, due to the volume of material in each of her themes, to break this down here. This book is structured into five chapters to correspond with its five case studies. Farrell has themed her case studies based on wider societal issues that she interleaves with the stories of multiple women. This is important because otherwise, there is the danger of losing the human aspect of these cases and reducing them to broad-brush arguments. As proven in Farrell's previous works, she demonstrates that these women were not exceptions and in doing so, she gives voices to ordinary women who might otherwise have been forgotten.

In the first half of *Women, Crime and Punishment* Farrell tells us about the everyday lived experiences of women in the convict prisons of Ireland. Farrell discusses sanitation, rebellion, work, schooling, length of incarceration and uniform. The female uniforms here stand out, because as Farrell notes, there were four different types, varying in style and colour to reflect the different status of the convicts. Farrell explores the ways in which women expressed individuality by altering their uniform through removing collars, tearing hems and wearing neckerchiefs. Although the convict uniform was implemented in English prisons by the mid-Victorian era, the differentiation of uniform based on a points system was not a practice that was replicated in the British convict system.⁴ Uniform was

³ K.D.M Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity, and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.1-245; David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry 1600-1930: The World the Peasants Made*. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), pp.38-39.

⁴ David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth, 1834-1914*, Seminar Studies in History (London ; New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), pp. 38–39.

intended to de-individualize convicts and control their appearance. Farrell suggests that in the women's prisons she studied, the uniform was a bargaining chip for good behaviour, although as she argues, this was hardly a successful penal model.⁵ Farrell's exploration of the attitudes to the uniform from the perspective of the convicts wearing it is one small example of the many new aspects of convict life she shares throughout her chapters.

In the second sub-chapter, Farrell introduces us to the Carroll family. This complicated family of petty criminals frame the rest of her chapter which explores familial bonds maintained or dissolved during their detention. This chapter has disheartening elements whereby we learn of women who were abandoned by their families once they became institutionalised. Farrell goes through a particularly poignant case of a mother who, after five years of imprisonment, was unsuccessful in regaining custody of her child. Farrell's dip into this story is particularly captivating as she expands upon the feelings these women would have experienced, not simply being incarcerated and imprisoned, but for some, recognising a lost relationship and maternal bond.

Farrell uses thousands of prison files including letters sent back to the prison after a convict's release. These sources are comprehensive. The high number of exemplary cases in these chapters often encourages the narrative style to switch from one convict to another very quickly. However, this is representative of the short snippets of stories she finds in the archives. Although women such as Catherine Lavelle (depicted on the cover image) were well known and had exceptionally thorough sources, others had no more than one or two mentions in the archive. Intermingling these stories shows that Farrell is not trying to follow any one convict's prison journey; instead, she brings to life the thorny and intricate lives of many women. Thus, Farrell's methodology and data collection are made glaringly clear. She repeats the sample size often in this chapter and it is clear that she is confident in stating how representative this evidence is of Irish female convicts' nineteenth century prison experience.

⁵ Paul Carter, Jeff James, and Steve King, 'Punishing Paupers? Control, Discipline and Mental Health in the Southwell Workhouse (1836–71)', *Rural History*, 30.2 (2019), p.164.

Women were also involved in the prison system as employees and Farrell discusses in later chapters, the bonds and relationships that could be formed between prison matrons and female convicts. In contrast, Farrell also describes the stigma and criticism female prison employees faced from their male counterparts for their 'weakness' in trusting and perhaps liking certain inmates. In further chapters Farrell pulls at the strings of convicts' relationships, friendship, marital or extra-marital relations as well as their enemies and fights or conflict that occurred amongst inmates. She argues that her female convicts and convicts in general, are a lens through which to recover the voices and relationships of lower-class people who were not in a workhouse, an asylum or an industrial school but often shared traits such as poverty or mental illness. It is the first time, through this book, that the voices of such people have been centre stage. Farrell uses sources from the prison staff to form a picture of what happened to these women but also writes their stories from their perspectives in order to emphasise that they were real people with real lives and real stories to tell.

Farrell's convict testimony and multi-dimensional sources demonstrate that the prison system was a pseudo society/community. It had its own set of rules visible through work and dietary regulations, correspondence regulation, and a points-based reward system. The females in this prison were deprived of many things but were likewise able to create friendships and maintain kinship bonds, even across institutions. This, Farrell argues, is a very personal experience and depends completely upon individual circumstances. Farrell herself is therefore right to argue in her conclusion that this book is heavily 'saturated with further evidence of women's agency' in penal institutions and that her study has been possible because such significant identity documents exist in the form of letters, petitions, diaries.⁶ Farrell argues that convicted women are valuable to examine because their personalities came through in the documents. Sophisticated record linkage work in archives has allowed historians, such as Farrell, to recover multiple perspectives on

⁶ Elaine Farrell, *Women, Crime and Punishment in Ireland: Life in the Nineteenth-Century Convict Prison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 257.

prison life. As Farrell says, 'these were ordinary lives captured on paper because of an extraordinary sentence' and this concept will contribute greatly to a number of further studies into the identities of people long forgotten.⁷

⁷ Farrell, p.260.