




BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE RENDU

Ted McCoy, *Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's Most Notorious Prison*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019, 148 pp.

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Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's Most Notorious Prison provides an in-depth understanding of women's resistance in Canada and the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The author accomplishes this by undertaking a case analysis of the resistance actions of four women inmates against prison authorities and administration through strikes, minor infractions of rules and regulations, slang or argots, and norm violations. Excluding the first and last chapters, the introduction, and the conclusion, the remaining chapters consist of case analyses of these four inmates. Kingston Penitentiary's changes in punishment patterns and policies parallel the lives of the four convicts, which the author uses to highlight the need for prison reform in Canada. Through an exploration of four cases in a single prison from 1838 to 1934, the book reveals that solitary confinement failed to reform criminals despite punishments such as dark cells, boxes, and dungeons. The author critiques prison systems as ineffective due to their effects on the physical and mental health of prisoners, crime commission, reoffending, and attempts at suicide. In parallel with colonial prisons and the cases of Bridget Donnelly, Charlotte Reveille, Emily Boyle, and Kate Slattery, prisons continue to exert extreme power over prisoners through ineffective confinement against resistance.

In the first chapter, the author analyzes the Canadian prison context and describes the methodological and theoretical approach of the book. The author then argues that the impact of punishment on crime is less significant than its social position and calls for societal changes to address unemployment, poverty, and marginalization that promote resistance, and emphasizes the need for political-economic and feminist perspectives.

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In the second chapter, the author analyzes the biography of Bridget Donnelly—an Irish immigrant, who, beginning at the age of eighteen, was a recidivist and repeat offender who served eight different sentences of two to three years, each time for larceny at Kingston Penitentiary from 1838 to 1880. This case highlights the forced criminal activities of immigrant communities due to their impoverishment and marginalization despite attempts at correction and reform. The third chapter examines Charlotte Reveille’s “moral insanity” (her nervous breakdown, mental illness, psychiatric problems, and suicidal behavior) despite her three-year sentence, additional whippings, solitary confinement, and enclosure in dark boxes, which highlight her incorrigible criminal record. The chapter brilliantly explores how the capitalist system established power and domination over prisoners through criminalization, experimentation, and medicalization in the colonial period, as depicted by Michel Foucault and David Arnold.¹ Charlotte is mistreated by a prison doctor, leading to her nearly bleeding to death. In later chapters, Kate Slattery and Emily Boyle are portrayed as notorious female criminals and mothers, respectively, highlighting the debate around the labor exploitation of women in a capitalist social reality. In the last chapter, in order to highlight the failure of Canadian prison reform over the last 150 years, the author ironically compares the tragic death of inmate Ashley Smith in 2007 with the ongoing discrimination against women during colonial times. Despite numerous policies and scientific discoveries regarding prison reform, the prisoners involved in soft and hard resistance movement remain resistant due to a lack of social, economic, and structural changes.

By applying a historical and case study methodology, McCoy explores how, historically, Canadian penal policies and prisoners’ resistance were inextricably related. Through the use of a range of sources, including prison warden disciplinary reports, medical registers, and archival sources, McCoy effectively explores the cases of Bridget Donnelly, Charlotte Reveille, Kate Slattery, and Emily Boyle in order to offer multiple perspectives, which enables readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of these infamous criminal cases. The author also applies feminist perspectives and a political economy lens to describe the cases in order to build an understanding of how class, gender, and socioeconomic issues are intricately related to prison and punishment. For example, the cases of Bridget Donnelly and Kate Slattery reveal a correlation between poverty and crime. Both of the aforementioned examples were from Irish immigrant families, and both were characterized by criminal activities stemming from their struggle for survival. As McCoy notes: “[T]he effect of poverty and class oppression on women’s lives as Upper Canada transitioned to industrial capitalism ... with the rise of the Canadian penitentiary, poverty and imprisonment represented a joint experience for some people.”²

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Verso, 1977); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (California: University of California Press, 1993); David Arnold, “The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge and Penology in Nineteenth-Century India,” *Subaltern Studies* 8 (1994): 148.

² Ted McCoy, *Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada’s Most Notorious Prison* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019), 13.

McCoy's book provides readers with a critical lens through which to understand how prisoners resisted and revolted against authorities, particularly prison administrators, security guards, and medical personnel. In Bridget Donnelly's case, for example, she actively resists prison tasks, uses abusive language, assaults inmates, and creates slang that targets administrative and medical staff while fighting against oppressive confinement through strikes. Additionally, the study explores the advocacy efforts of Emily Boyle and her spouse that were aimed at securing maternal rights and parental responsibilities for incarcerated individuals.

While the author discusses the crime and punishment of poor and marginalized women, he does not interrogate their socioeconomic and structural context from the perspective of intersectional feminism.³ For example, in the case of the two Irish Canadian women (Bridget Donnelly and Kate Slattery), an intersectional analysis of their parents' education, class, social status, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status would be helpful and critical for fully depicting their cases and their associated criminal and resistance activities. It is true, however, that a case analysis based on archival data has methodological limitations as compared with, for example, empirical research, which can allow logical connections between data and theory, particularly where social surveys and ethnographic research are utilized.

Finally, the colonial and postcolonial periods witnessed the inadequacy of the prison system, specifically in relation to practices such as solitary confinement and the use of dark cells, and these shortcomings prompted a movement toward social liberation and the recognition of gender-based discrimination through the concept of prison abolition. Scholars such as Davis and Piche have explored this topic, highlighting the potential of prison abolition as a theoretical framework to address these issues.⁴ McCoy, however, either intentionally or unintentionally sidesteps the topic of prison abolition. Perhaps, despite identifying prisons as failed institutions for correction and rehabilitation from a political-economic and feminist lens, the author does not directly support abolition.

³ See e.g. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Violence Against Women," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

⁴ Angela Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, vol. 2 (London: Haymarket Books, 2022); Justin Piche, "Penal Abolitionism: A Different Kind of Reform: Justin Piché Describes How Abolitionist Views Can Arise from the Experience of Working within the System," *Criminal Justice Matters* 77, no. 1 (2009): 30–31.