

Introduction

From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, the woman prisoner has aroused strong sympathies from feminists and social reformers. When under the control of male keepers, she represents an extreme case of sexual powerlessness. Her imprisonment symbolizes as well the constraints placed on all women by authoritarian institutions. Nineteenth-century reformers first proclaimed a sisterhood with the imprisoned woman, and contemporary feminists explicitly identify with her plight. As Bernice Reagon explains in her song about Joann Little, the black prisoner who fought back when raped by her jailer: "Joann is you and Joann is me / Our Prison is the whole society."¹

Their Sisters' Keepers explores the origins of women's concerns for female inmates in the United States. Its subjects are reformers, their ideas, and the institutions they created. Although female criminals are not the focus of this study, the meaning of women's crime, the impact of prisons on female inmates, and the changing relationship between reformers and criminals are important elements of this history. The first section of the book analyzes white, middle-class women's response to the problems of female prisoners in the nineteenth century. The central chapters provide a composite history of the first state prisons run by and for women, from approximately 1870 to 1910. The third section investigates the work of women criminologists and penologists during the Progressive era. An epilogue suggests the legacy of women's prison reform since 1920.

The growing literature on the history of women in the nineteenth century provides the major framework for this study. In the past decade two approaches have dominated this field. The first asks whether women as a group lost or gained status as America changed from an agricultural to an industrial society. Many scholars argue that middle-class women's economic and political rights declined after the Revolutionary era as a result of the gradual separation of paid work in the public sphere and unpaid work in the home.² Other writers stress the improvements industrialization brought to these women's lives and the ways they gained

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power within the family.³ The second approach explores the separate female sphere of the nineteenth century. Although the cultural ideal of the "true woman"⁴ confined to her home has long influenced historians' critique of woman's sphere, recent studies have shown that some women created a personally supportive sisterhood from this model. Furthermore, separate female networks and religious or social organizations provided a base from which women could expand their influence far beyond the domestic sphere.⁵

Both of these themes—the changing status of women and the function of the female sphere—help explain the tensions that run throughout the history of women's prison reform. The movement to aid female prisoners had roots in the antebellum, domestic, female sphere, yet it facilitated white middle-class women's entry into public and professional work by the end of the century. Throughout this period, however, prison reformers clung to a definition of woman's separate nature that limited their own power and often stifled the inmates they sought to aid. Why reformers in the nineteenth century used this argument of sexual difference, and women in the Progressive era began to question it, is one of the problems addressed in this book.

Women's prison reform has a complicated relationship to the history of American feminism. Prison reformers had important feminist insights; that is, they recognized sexual inequalities and at times spoke out against them. In contrast to women in the temperance and abolitionist movements, however, they only rarely became women's rights activists. Rather, prison reformers in the nineteenth century adopted a "separate but equal" political strategy that derived, in part, from the nature of their work. Abolitionists wanted to emancipate individuals from an oppressive institution, slavery; women who applied this principle to their own sex often demanded freedom from legal restraints.⁶ Prison reformers, however, did not reject the institution that controlled criminals. Instead, they wanted to improve penal treatment of women, and to do so they eventually became keepers in their own prisons. Arguments about individual liberty were unlikely to develop in this setting, while arguments about sexual differences flourished in support of their cause.

Although women's history provides the central context for this study, the history of prisons offers another important perspective. The fact that Americans increasingly turned to state institutions to house the poor, insane, and criminal in the nineteenth century

helps explain why women sought to establish their own prisons during this period. In addition, the histories of these institutions often ran parallel, and at times women's prisons followed their patterns. But because they reflected the different contours of women's historical experience, the separate prisons had unique origins and functions that raise questions about both prisons as institutions and the sexual categories they supported.

The historical literature on prisons raises as well the difficult problem of evaluating institutional reforms. One school of thought measures change in comparison to past abuses. As prison historian O. F. Lewis wrote in 1922: "A reform is to be judged, of course, not by what to-day would be considered adequate . . . but in the light of its relative progressiveness as a substitute for existing conditions, in an existing state of public opinion and of prevailing customs."⁷ Revisionist historians, in contrast, are often critical of the failures of past reforms in comparison to radical alternatives. David Rothman, for instance, evaluated the founders of prisons and insane asylums from this perspective in 1971: "By incarcerating the deviant and dependent, and defending the step with hyperbolic rhetoric, they discouraged—really eliminated—the search for other solutions that might have been less susceptible to abuse."⁸

Both of these perspectives can be applied to the history of women's prison reform. The activists deserve credit for their progressive and feminist insights and for the benefits they procured for female inmates. At the same time, an historical analysis of the limitations of their institutions may contribute to new solutions to the problems of women prisoners. In the final chapter I have evaluated the women's prisons in these terms. Throughout the book, however, I have tried to concentrate on a series of broader historical questions: Why did reformers think and act as they did? What internal and external forces influenced the history of their institutions? How, and why, did their movement change from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries? And why has the legacy of "their sisters' keepers" remained so powerful?