

**Beyond the Attic Door: A Feminist Social History of Imprisonment  
at the Portage Gaol From 1945 to 1970**

**By**

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**A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

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Winnipeg, Manitoba**

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A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of  
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree  
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## Abstract

By documenting aspects of the history of the women's gaol in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, this project aims to contribute to our knowledge of women's imprisonment, an area which has been neglected in academic and popular literature. Particular attention is devoted to gaol history from the time it became a women's institution in 1945 until 1970. Gaol records, archived documents and interview data are combined to produce this account of the history of the Portage Gaol. The initial focus is on reconstructing who the women were and why they were imprisoned at the gaol. An administrative time line is then set out which provides some detail of the tenure of the three superintendents who oversaw the gaol throughout the period in question. Following these descriptions of who some of the main characters were and their roles, an analysis of what day-to-day life at the gaol was like is presented. Gaol regimes were implemented to ensure the close supervision and containment of inmates within the gaol. Work, education, recreation, discipline, classification and segregation all provided opportunities for gaol staff to scrutinize, correct and generally control female inmates. Regardless of the multitude of constraints placed on their daily lives within the gaol, inmates found ways to maintain some of their individuality and autonomy while incarcerated. Outright resistance to gaol regimes was rare, as most women complied with gaol routines. When conflict did occur between inmates or between inmates and staff, it was typically in response to the conditions of confinement at the Portage Gaol. By bringing this group of female inmates into focus, a small piece of history can be reclaimed from the attic and given the attention it deserves.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members, Steve Brickey and Gerry Friesen for their insightful comments and enthusiasm for this work. I am particularly grateful to my thesis advisor, Elizabeth Comack for sharing her knowledge and support throughout this process.

I would also like to thank former Gaol Superintendent Wayne Bott for granting me access to the attic of the Portage gaol, where many of the documents used in writing this thesis were found. In addition, the staff at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba were exceptionally helpful in tracking down documents held in their collections. I owe a special thanks to Acquisitions Technician, Gail Singleton for her expertise and assistance in locating numerous resources that were consulted in writing this thesis.

And, finally, I thank my parents. Although they will never have the opportunity to read this, their encouragement and lessons in the appreciation of the 'little things' will guide me forever.

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## Introduction

The history of imprisonment in Manitoba extends beyond a century, yet our knowledge of the institutions in which inmates were confined is in its infancy. It is unfortunate, but of no surprise, that we have very little historical awareness of women's incarceration. Generally speaking, women's penal history has received very little attention in the academic and popular literature. In particular, as Margaret Shaw (1991:2) notes, "no current history of women in provincial institutions would appear to exist." This is due, at least in part, to the androcentric bias in the disciplines of criminology and history. The purpose of this thesis is to begin the process of constructing a feminist social history of women's provincial incarceration in Manitoba. Specifically, the survival of a variety of sources of information have enabled the writing of a social history of the Portage Gaol.

The primary sources of data were literally found 'beyond the attic door' of the Portage Gaol. Scattered boxes of files, reports and logbooks were stored alongside Christmas decorations, cribs, handcuffs and work boots. The organization and assessment of these documents led to the selection of the time frame of 1945 to 1970<sup>1</sup> as the focus for this project. Although incomplete, gaol records have survived from the gaol's inception in 1896. Initially built to house men awaiting trial, the gaol had several uses before it became an institution that would house an exclusively female population. From 1945 to the present, the Portage Gaol has been designated

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<sup>1</sup> Although I had access to gaol records that extended into the mid 1980s, the choice was made to limit this project to 1970. This decision was made, in part, to narrow the focus of the project to a manageable time period. Also, issues of confidentiality were managed by restricting the range of study to earlier historical documents.

a women's provincial institution. The change to a women's gaol in 1945 created a logical place to begin reconstructing this history of the Portage Gaol.

### **Women as 'Other'**

This project has grown partially out of the lessons and critiques found in the works of feminist criminologists. Over the past two decades, a number of writers have critiqued the theories and methods of mainstream criminology (see, for example, Cain 1989; Daly & Chesney-Lind 1988; Gelsthorpe & Morris 1990; Heidensohn 1985; Leonard 1982; Naffine 1987; Smart 1976). This work has brought attention to the marginalization and exclusion of women in criminology. In addition to highlighting the omission of women, feminists have noted that on the rare occasion that women have been included in the criminological literature, they were likely to be represented in stereotypical or distorted characterizations. In fact, Marcia Rice (1994:59) has suggested that the bulk of this androcentric work has relied on middle-class notions of morality and biological explanations of the causes of women's involvement in crime. As observed by Mark Cousins, the theoretical literature concerning female criminality has been impaired by both "oblivion and error."

[C]riminology has left women out ... [I]t has responded to oppression with amnesia; that what has been hidden from history is not likely to be found by the mainstream historian ... [W]hat has not been ignored has been in error...[T]he limitation of the majority of these studies arises as a result of basic inadequacy in the perception of the nature of women and a reliance upon a determinant model of female behaviour. (Cousins 1980:111-112)

In the 1980s, attempts were made to fill the gaps left by the criminologists who had ignored women in their work. At the time, the strategy of adding women to the theoretical discussions of penalty was regarded by most as a logical starting point. To varying extents, Frances Heidensohn (1985), Nicole Hahn Rafter (1985) and R. Emerson Dobash and her colleagues (1986) all adopted this approach in their work. However, feminist analysts subsequently challenged these add-on tactics. Carol Smart (1990:79), for instance, asserted that adding women onto malestream theories only deepens the entrenchment of males as 'the' subject of criminology; positioning women as 'addendums' to masculinist thought effectively marginalizes women as subjects of inquiry in their own right. The consequences of these 'add-on' tactics are that "(m)ales are the yardstick against which both actions by and treatment of females are measured. Women and girls exist as Other; that is to say, they exist only in their difference from the male, the normal" (Cain 1990:2).

In recent years, feminists have become aware of the limitations of simply augmenting the historical and theoretical records with women's voices. The 'new' task of feminist historical work has become the problematization of the categories, methodologies and epistemologies that were developed and relied upon by mainstream writers. An integral part of these strategies has been the feminist critique of the assumptions and stereotypes about women that have traditionally been relied upon.

The literature is stocked with images of the criminal as 'abnormal,' 'sick' or 'other' in society. On the rare occasions that women were included in the

mainstream grand theoretical projects in criminology, they were likely to be portrayed as “either mad, masculine, menopausal, or maladjusted (to conventional female roles)” (O’Dwyer et al. 1987:178). Mainstream criminologists have been concerned primarily with locating the causes and motivations for criminal behaviour.

Given their preferences for explanations of crime that individualize and pathologize behaviour, the experiences of women in prison have been obscured. The “gargoyle-like stereotype” of the sick or dangerous criminal woman has loomed over the academic and popular literature (Worrall 1990:2). Carol Smart (1976:52) observed that most androcentric criminologists naively believed that “biologically based, causal factors can explain the motivation and reasoning of complex, culturally located and socially meaningful acts.” Stripped of contextual meaning, the offences of those who have been defined as criminal have often been used by theorists as evidence of a defect or pathology of the individual. In short, mainstream criminologists have drawn a bold line that separates the ‘normal’ from the ‘abnormal’ or criminal.

In addition to portraying the criminal as ‘other,’ mainstream theorists have been criticized for their reliance on gender stereotypes in discussions of women and crime. Pat Carlen and Ann Worrall (1987) have asserted that as gendered subjects in the criminal justice system, women have been represented and treated in terms of their allegedly innate qualities of ‘femininity, domesticity and pathology.’ These characteristics are held out as the ‘norm’ for all ‘good’ women to adhere to. In Britain, Clarice Feinman found that ideas about the character and behaviour of the ‘normal’ woman had a significant influence on criminal justice as it applies to

women. She found that women who came into conflict with the law were portrayed as having a number of inherent biological traits. "Women who went against their natural tendencies were considered to be 'monsters', 'the embodiment of the evil principle', and 'unable to distinguish right from wrong'" (Feinman 1979: 87-88). From the mainstream perspective, the woman who broke the law was also in violation of her 'natural' character as passive, maternal and weak.

In the present work, particular consideration has been given to making women visible, while avoiding the 'othering' of inmates that has characterized the work of mainstream criminologists. I have taken Maureen Cain's advice and committed myself to "studying women as women, and comparing different groups of women, rather than women and men." Cain suggests that this approach enables us to take "off the blinkers of the male-as-yardstick and male common sense, so that *new* thoughts can come into the social and criminological worlds" (1990:8). Careful attention has also been given to avoiding the sexist and stereotypical conceptions of women that have dominated the bulk of the male-centred literature to date. One of the ways of reaching a fuller understanding of the history of women's incarceration at the Portage Gaol was to write a 'social' history rather than a traditional history.

### **Social History**

Social history stands in contrast to traditional accounts in several ways. A number of social histories from the criminological literature can be used as examples. One of the defining features of David Rothman's (1971), Michel Foucault's (1977) and Michael

Ignatieff's (1978) discussions of penal history is the study of prisons with an awareness that "power relations are rooted in the system of social networks." (Foucault 1982:793). This perspective is in contrast to the traditional or administrative accounts of penal histories that isolate the prison as 'the' site of power relations in their discussions. The social historian provides an analysis of the institution, its practices and the people who were confined behind its walls, with careful attention being given to the relation that the inner workings of the prison has to power relations in the wider society at that time.

This type of research focuses attention on the inherently political nature of history. For this reason, social context is extremely important in building an understanding of penal history. We can therefore give Rothman, Foucault and Ignatieff the label of 'social historian' because "they all provided a sense of the pivotal importance of social context, that is, of contextualizing prison regimes" (Howe 1994:63). The social historians have challenged the linear 'change-as-progress' assumptions of traditional history by making context an integral part of their analyses. In this sense, social history is an inherently critical endeavour. Problematizing history, challenging the 'truths' of the traditional historians and necessarily leaving the existence and meanings of the prison open to question are priorities of the social historian (Howe 1994:127).

Michel Foucault (cited in Gandal 1986:127) explains this approach simply as "an effort to make problematic and throw into question the practices, the rules, the institutions, the habits and the self-evidences that have piled up for decades and

decades.” This approach necessarily leads the social historian to question ‘what are prisons for?’ and ‘is the modern prison necessarily about crime and punishment at all?’ (Carlen 1983; Dobash et al. 1986; Howe 1994; Rafter 1985). Traditional historians are taken to task by social historians for treating penal policy as a “self-contained and self-explicable sphere” (Howe 1994:48). Grand narratives written by traditional historians are overturned by social historians who believe that “history is best told as a story of power relations and struggle, a story that is contradictory, heterogeneous, and fragmented” (Newton 1989:152).

To date, penal history has been written primarily from a male perspective. Although Rothman, Foucault and Ignatieff produced masculinist accounts of prison history (Howe 1994), they are not to be discarded. In the 1980s, feminists began a number of historical research projects and critically engaged social historians concerning their apparent neglect of women in prison. As a result of these efforts, criminologists have developed their own approaches to writing women’s penal history.

### **Women’s Imprisonment**

A number of social histories of women’s imprisonment have been written over the past two decades. Most of this work has been done in Britain, Scotland and the United States (Carlen 1983; Dobash et al. 1986; Freedman 1981; Heidensohn 1985; Rafter 1985 etc.) In laying the foundation for analysis, all of these authors have started by asking two important questions:

1. Who were the women incarcerated in these institutions?
2. What events led to their confinement in these institutions?

Some striking similarities in the profiles of women prisoners are evident in the literature. Demographically, incarcerated women are likely to live on the margins of their society in terms of their race, class and marital status. They are typically young and not married. The offences for which women received custodial sentences were diverse and often reflected the moral, social or political concerns of their society at that particular point in history. For instance, societal concern with issues related to drugs, alcohol or prostitution has varied over time. The identification of issues or groups of people as 'problems' has led to increases or decreases in the emphasis placed on some behaviours as criminal. Therefore, we must be careful to note social concerns when commenting on crimes for which women have been incarcerated throughout history. It has been documented in the literature that while women were receiving formal sanctions for breaking the codified rules of their society, an impression is also left that these women were being punished for stepping out of the confines of the ideal of white, middle class femininity and domesticity. Recurring themes in the literature include the economic marginality of female offenders and the variety of offences for which they were incarcerated.

From Scotland to New York, it has been documented that the majority of women incarcerated had somehow breached the dominant cultural ideologies of 'proper' womanhood (Carlen 1983, Dobash et al. 1986, Rafter 1985). The 'proper' woman was to be married, with or without children; her priority was to be looking



after her 'domestic responsibilities' and not to be working at paid employment outside of the home. Many of the women who were incarcerated violated the prescriptions of 'proper' womanhood. Most were young and independent at the time of their incarceration. Most were unmarried, with or without children, and they worked outside of the home to provide for themselves and their families. It is in this sense that they were thought to have come to prison lacking "domestic discipline" (Carlen 1983:16).

If these women were employed prior to imprisonment, it is most likely that they would have been in low paying, unskilled and unstable positions (Dobash et al. 1986:207, Johnson & Rodgers 1993:98). With little or no formal education, incarcerated women had few opportunities to find stable, well paying jobs. Barriers abounded which supported the segregation of women in low paying, unstable positions. The dominant ideology upheld women's 'natural' or 'normal' place in society as the home, acting as wives and mothers.

Throughout history, women have been incarcerated for a wide range of law violations. According to Frances Heidensohn (cited in Carlen and Worrall 1987:17), one of the characteristics of women's involvement in crime is the heterogeneity of their offences. Women have been represented across the entire spectrum of crime categories, from petty property crimes to violent offences (Dobash et al. 1986:207). However, the majority of incarcerated women through history have served relatively short sentences for minor law violations. The nature of the majority of women's conflicts with the law suggests a relationship between their marginal economic

position and the types of offences they committed. The most commonly noted reasons for the incarceration of women were involvement in property crime and the failure to pay fines (Carlen 1983, Dobash et al. 1986, Heidensohn 1985). The poor material conditions of these women are reflected in the “economic rationality” of these types of offences (Heidensohn 1987:17). Some authors have connected economically-motivated offending with women’s responsibility to care for their families and themselves (Dobash et al. 1986:92). Also, the social and political climate of the society has played a role in which offences are considered sanctionable in any given historical period.

### **The Portage Gaol**

Given the general inattention to women’s penal history in both popular and academic literature, the focus on the Portage Gaol seems appropriate. This project has been informed by the critiques of criminological literature and the relevance of social history in telling a story of women’s imprisonment. Chapter One concentrates on answering two main questions. The first is, ‘who were the women incarcerated at the Portage Gaol from 1945 to 1970?’ This question is answered by presenting demographic information concerning the age, marital status, race, education and occupation of women at the time of their admission. These data are also compared to demographic information collected about male inmates at the Headingly Gaol during the same time frame and to more current demographics from the Portage Gaol. The second question addressed in Chapter One is ‘why were the women imprisoned?’ An

answer to this question is provided in a discussion of the types of offences for which women received gaol sentences.

The aim of Chapter Two is to provide an administrative time line of the Portage Gaol. The building was constructed in 1896 with the mandate of housing male inmates. By 1945, the institution held an exclusively female population. A number of changes in Manitoba's Department of Corrections precipitated the transitions at the Portage Gaol. The discussion in Chapter Two concentrates on the tenure of three superintendents who were present at the gaol during the period in question. Each superintendent approached his or her work differently, with a variety of consequences for the organization of the staff, inmates and day-to-day activities at the gaol.

While Chapters One and Two describe some of the key players at the Portage Gaol from 1945 to 1970, Chapter Three is concerned with what the players did while they were at the gaol. Depending on the administrative priorities of the superintendent and staff, inmates were organized, classified and segregated according to a number of categories. These labels and the subsequent placement of women within the gaol had implications for how the women were expected to spend their time while incarcerated. As well, various forms of discipline and punishment were used to control and constrain women prisoners. Chapter Three also provides a description of the range of activity available to inmates at the gaol. Work, education and recreation were all key elements in the daily operations of the gaol from 1945 to 1970.

Chapter Four considers the women's responses to the conditions of their confinement. In an institution where control over inmates is a priority, these women found numerous ways to be autonomous. The daily routines were the site of many negotiations for control within the gaol. While the majority of women were mostly compliant with gaol routines, there were a number of strategies of resistance employed by inmates. Discussions of strategic, compliant and resistant women are central to this chapter.

The main objective of this project is to contribute to the development of a feminist social history of imprisonment. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the discussion begins with who the women were and why they were at the gaol and ends with an analysis of women's attempts to maintain some autonomy in such a restrictive environment. By bringing this group of females into focus, the hope is that a small piece of history can be reclaimed from the attic and given the attention it deserves.

## **Chapter One Counting the Few**

In the past two decades, writers from Britain, Scotland and the United States have begun to draw women's penal histories out of the shadows (see Carlen 1983; Dobash et al. 1986; Freedman 1981; Heidensohn 1985; Rafter 1985). These authors concerned themselves with writing histories that challenged the traditional 'change as progress' narratives of penality which have been published in the past. Specifically, social historians of women's imprisonment have attempted to bring into focus how race, class and patriarchal assumptions have "shaped the imprisonment of women over time, the operation of regimes of punishment and discipline, the content of the authoritative official discourses on the criminality of the imprisoned women, and the way official conceptions and government policies have been translated into prison practices" (Dobash et al. 1986:10-11). A new set of research priorities was formed, focusing on locating women historically, socially and materially in the societies from which they came.

### **Demographics**

The common starting point of these histories has been to question 'who were the women?' and 'why were they imprisoned?' The answers to these questions helped to frame subsequent analyses of the ways in which race, class and gender shaped the development of women's imprisonment. For instance, Nicole Hahn Rafter (1985) provided criticism of androcentric penal historians by bringing to light the shadowed existence of women's prisons in the United States. Rafter provided information

about inmates' age, employment, marital status, religion, racial or ethnic ancestry and law violations. This contextual work enabled an analysis that went beyond the usual problematic assumptions about the relations between crime and punishment. Detailed historical information about women imprisoned in New York State from 1894 to 1931 allowed Rafter to make connections between social changes in immigration, urbanization, capitalism and the development of penal institutions for women. Similarly, by building their analysis on a strong demographic foundation, Rebecca Dobash, Russell Dobash and Sue Gutteridge (1986) were able to discuss how assumptions about class and gender influenced the incarceration of women in Great Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the Canadian context, however, studies of women in prison have been limited. For example, the first book about "women in conflict with the law" was published in Canada in 1985 (Adelberg and Currie). Prior to the publication of this book, there was virtually no sociological or historical work written on women's imprisonment in Canada. Despite some recent concern with the conditions and reasons for women's federal imprisonment (Creating Choices, 1991), there remains a significant gap in our knowledge.

At this time, we do know that a relatively small number of women are incarcerated in Canada and that the majority have been remanded or serve their sentences in provincial gaols. For instance, in 1989-1990, 3 percent of the admissions to federal custody and 8 percent of the admissions to provincial custody were women (*Juristat*, December 1990). In 1991, 3,500 women were serving sentences and approximately 8,500 were on remand in provincial or territorial gaols

(Johnson & Rodgers 1993:106). More recently, "in 1996-1997, males represented 91% and females 9% of all admissions to provincial/territorial prisons" (Juristat vol.18 1998:7). While we know that more women are imprisoned provincially rather than federally in Canada, beyond these sparse figures we know relatively little about the women who have spent time behind the walls and bars of Canada's gaols.

One study by Elizabeth Comack (1993) does provide a yardstick for historical change at the Portage Gaol. As part of the study, demographic information was collected on 727 women admitted to the Portage Correctional Institution between 1988 and 1993. From these data, it was concluded:

....[T]he women at Portage tend to be young, single, with low levels of education and high levels of unemployment . . . . While the women in general are disadvantaged in terms of their education and employment status, native women are especially so, as the vast majority have grade ten or less and were unemployed at the time of admission. . . . Overall, however, property and drug and alcohol offences account for a significant proportion of the offences for which women are admitted to the Portage Institution. (Comack 1993:16)

The purpose of this chapter is to address the questions of 'who were the women?' and 'why were they imprisoned?' as they apply to the history of the Portage Gaol from 1945 to 1970. More specifically, data pertaining to the age, marital status, race, occupations and offence(s) of the women prisoners will be presented. Where possible, these historical demographics will be compared to more current data, as well as to selected demographic information about the men admitted to the Headingly Provincial Gaol in Manitoba from 1945 to 1970.