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Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England 1860-1914

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Reviewer:

Maria Luddy

I come to Paula Bartley's book as someone who has for a number of years, been examining the extent and nature of prostitution in Ireland. Attitudes towards prostitutes and prostitution within Irish culture were in many ways similar to those that prevailed in England. They were also distinctly different. The difference becomes most obvious from the late nineteenth century when nationalist Ireland began to further differentiate its culture from that of England and when Catholicism as a social, ethical and moral force was supreme. It is also from the end of the nineteenth century that Bartley sees distinct developments emerging in the area of social purity and attitudes towards prostitution in England. Her book is a study of attempts to rid society of the curse of prostitution through prevention and reform, placed firmly within the context of rescue work. There is already a significant body of scholarship on prostitution and much of that scholarship, particularly as it relates to England, concentrates on campaigns to control or abolish prostitution. Other significant research explores the organisation of commercial sex and historians have been much influenced by cultural and literary studies that examine the discursive elements within prostitution and the social and cultural construction of the prostitute. The development of women's history has made the study of prostitution a more complex one. Issues of the representation of women who engage in prostitution, together with the material circumstances of their lives and the examination of the social construction of sexuality and gender has broadened the subject of prostitution to encompass an exploration of a wide range of interrelated issues which include masculinity, femininity and sexuality amongst other topics.

The book is divided into four sections and the issues covered in each are in many ways distinct from each other. Section one looks at the extent of prostitution, attempts at reform within refuges and life within these reform institutions; the second section is taken up with an examination of the role of the Ladies' Associations

for the Care of Friendless Girls; part three examines the links between prostitution and the category of 'feeble-minded' and the fourth section looks at the suppression of prostitution and the issue of men and morality. The sources used are varied, and many will be new to historians of this subject. The papers of the National Society for the Protection of Young Girls, together with the correspondence of the Homes for Hope, papers relating to the London Lock Hospital and Asylum, as well as diaries and correspondence of individuals are used. Together with parliamentary papers and other official documentation these sources reveal the complexity of the issues under discussion.

Some of the issues and arguments raised by Bartley will be familiar to those who have studied prostitution. The first section of the book, for instance, examines the extent of prostitution, the nature of reform homes and life within these institutions. Estimating the population of prostitutes is fraught with difficulties and Bartley is wisely sceptical of the numbers of prostitutes given by contemporary sources. Life within rescue homes is detailed. We see how women gained entrance to these institutions, their daily routine, the material conditions of their lives, and the work engaged in. This was often laundry work, which helped to support the institution. Two years was generally considered to be a sufficient time to 'repent and reform' though here comparisons might have been made with convent-run institutions where, by the end of the century, nuns were reluctant to let any of their charges leave their institutions. Bartley also provides some interesting statistical information on the careers of these women once they had left the institutions, which reveal the limited success of these reform institutions. These statistics are taken from the published annual reports of the Rescue Society and the Church Penitentiary Association. The small numbers of women who availed of these rescue homes reflect the inability of these reformers and refuges to combat the commercialisation and commodification of women. It is unclear whether the actual registers of these rescue agencies still exist. An analysis of the entrants to Magdalen Asylums in Ireland, for instance, presents a complex picture of women who worked as prostitutes. Where asylum registers are available in Ireland, it is clear that many women entered these refuges regularly and used the institutions to tide them over poor work availability. Entrance is often seasonal and for the women who remain in the institutions it could be argued that they were making a choice to 'retire' from their occupation. A comparable analysis of registers for asylums in England might show up similar, or even different, patterns. Using such information is one way of gaining a picture of the lives of women who worked as prostitutes in this period. However, I am aware that access to such records, particularly where they relate to Catholic convent institutions, can be difficult. However, the lack of a comparative analysis between lay and religious-run refuges, especially those managed by nuns, excludes the opportunity to examine the attitudes of religious-run institutions to reform. In the case for Ireland it seems that the extent of Magdalen Asylums under convent management reinforced the conservative reaction to prostitution and women who worked as prostitutes. Amongst the middle classes such women were always deemed shameful. In England however, as Bartley shows, the apparent failure of reform work encouraged some rescue workers to try to stop the problem at source. Prevention, rather than cure, became the way to proceed.

One of the agencies deemed to have a particular effect on the extent of prostitution was the Ladies' Association for the Care of Friendless Girls, which by 1885, had 106 branches across England. It was one of many organisations attempting to promote social purity at this time. Power and authority framed the relationship between the Ladies' Associations and their supposed alliance with working-class women to bring about a reform in morality and hence prostitution. The absence of 'good moral teaching' was deemed a feature of working-class life. The Ladies' Associations, together with groups such as the Mothers' Union, the Girls' Friendly Society, the Woman's League, and other organisations set about teaching the poor, and especially their children, of the value of self-control and obedience. Bartley shows that the similarities between these groups was indeed superficial, they all had different aspirations and expectations for the work they were doing. The Ladies' Associations also began to take in 'wayward girls' and while espousing family values did not encourage their charges to maintain contact with their parents. In a sense parents also handed over responsibility for their daughters to this organisation. It would prove interesting to find out why they did this? What was the relationship between these homes and industrial schools? What kind of culture is being created when parents hand their 'wayward' children over to private organisations for 'care'? Is this somehow preferable to the state managing their care? I wonder also if it would be worth exploring the role of

outside finance in these preventive campaigns. Had industrial capitalists, or their money, any place in this reform?

Ellice Hopkins surfaces regularly in Bartley's study and was a singular individual in preventive work associated strongly with the Church of England. I would have liked to know more about her personal influence on the rise of preventive institutions. With regard to Ireland Hopkins had a profound impact on the creation of long-lasting vigilance associations when she visited the country in 1885. One of her biographers, an Irish woman named Rosa M. Barrett, had played a major role in child care and rescue in Ireland but was not publicly concerned with rescue or reform work. How were individuals in the English reform movement personally influenced by Hopkins? Indeed Bartley eschews attention to individuals instead concentrating on organisations and societies.

One of the more interesting aspects of the book is the discussion that emerges of the links made between prostitution and the 'feeble-minded'. Dr. Bartley correctly sees this link developing within the context of the 'psychiatric revolution' of the nineteenth century. The medicalisation of prostitution was not only associated with the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Discourses of feeble-mindedness allowed prostitution and the continuance of prostitution to be explained in a 'scientific' manner, a matter that no doubt offered some comfort to reformers. However a reliance on such beliefs also allowed social purity to become a social hygiene issue. The purity movement, as Greta Jones has pointed out, was the forerunner of the social hygiene movement. There is scope also for seeing changing attitudes towards prostitution in the light of the success of preventive medicine by the end of the nineteenth century. It is not psychiatry alone that encourages a 'scientific' diagnosis of the individual causes of prostitution. Preventive societies utilised the rhetoric of eugenics and medicine to initiate and force the government to enact legislation on sexual matters at a time when governments were not always willing to legislate on such issues. Preventive organisations were keen on education. Did, I wonder, the drive for purity reform translate into moral education in the schools?

It was clear by the 1880s that penitentiaries, reformatories and the various preventive agencies were proving ineffective in stemming prostitution. Numerous social purity groups emerged from this time and while they have generally been credited with lowering the level of prostitution, Bartley persuasively argues that their influence might be less than has been accepted by historians. One of the ways of gauging the extent of prostitution has been to look at judicial statistics. There is an obvious decline in convictions for prostitution after the introduction of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. However, while social purity activists claimed a direct influence on this decline it seems that lack of police activity, leading to fewer arrests, was a much more likely reason. I would also like to suggest that the perceived, or actual, decline in prostitution might also have been influenced by the growth of industrial capitalism and the impetus for urban reform which found expression through local government enactments, and the development of civic pride in the latter years of the century. Confinement to particular urban areas, and keeping prostitutes from public view, was a consequence of this development and the perception of a reduction in the levels of prostitution may have been a result of such confinement.

The final section of the book explores issues around men and morality. While Bartley provides a good survey of the attitudes of feminist reformers to male sexuality there is terrific scope in this section to discuss issues of masculinity. One of the prime features of the 1880s was the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. One of the principal features of the Act was the criminalisation of homosexuality. This in turn had considerable impact on the idea of masculinity and the creation of a homosexual identity. How was masculinity defined within preventative work? How did men argue for their place in preventive societies? The 1880s was also a period of perceived sexual danger particularly with the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888. Did such fears allow the purity movement to experience the success and receive the support it did?

While the women's movement made it clear that it wanted a single standard of morality, one that was based on women's ideals, it was also women, unfortunately, who were expected to enforce this morality. All good books lead one to new questions and a deeper understanding of the nature of the subject being discussed. Bartley's book is an important contribution to the study of prostitution. It is clear sighted and unsentimental.

It provides an interesting insight into the management of rescue homes and the ultimate failures of both preventive and reform work. Bartley argues that social purity groups were a mixture of radicalism and conservative repression. Ultimately social purists were unsuccessful in eliminating prostitution and failed to have a significant impact on social policy.

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