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### Celebrating *Four Unruly Women*

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## Celebrating *Four Unruly Women*

Author : Elaine Craig

Date : April 10, 2019

Ted McCoy, [\*Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's Most Notorious Prison\*](#) (2019).

In 1846, prison administrators at the Kingston Penitentiary replaced the daily whipping and flogging of prisoners with a new form punishment – The Box. The Box, as Ted McCoy describes it in his new book, [\*Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's Most Notorious Prison\*](#), was a six foot tall, three foot deep coffin used to impose a form of extreme isolation on unruly prisoners. The Box became the primary form of severe punishment for women prisons at Kingston when flogging was abolished.

*Four Unruly Women* depicts a shocking portrait of the cruelty and inhumanity imposed upon the women imprisoned in Kingston Penitentiary between 1835 and 1935. McCoy also tells a powerful story about the incredible courage exhibited by women prisoners who resisted the practices of system oppression and patriarchy relied upon to structure the carceral environment in which they were imprisoned. In addition to floggings and extreme isolation these women were placed in dungeons, starved and, of course, sexually assaulted.

The book begins in 1848 with a story from Bridget Donnelly's imprisonment in Kingston Penitentiary. Donnelly spent much of her adult life there. As McCoy notes in his opening paragraphs, Donnelly spent time in Kingston Prison during the same period in which the much more well-known prisoner Grace Marks (the subject of Margaret Atwood's historical fiction novel *Alias Grace*) was imprisoned there. Donnelly entered the prison at age 18 in 1838 and was released for the last time more than forty years later in 1879. Bridget, McCoy writes, "was one of the forgotten" (P. 1). Chapter 2 explores the story of Charlotte Reville, whose mistreatment sparked debate in mid-19th century Canada about excessive punishment, criminality, sexuality and medicine. In Chapter 3 he turns to Kate Slattery who entered Kingston Penitentiary in 1890 having been convicted for breaking windows. His fourth chapter examines the imprisonment of Emily Boyle between 1926 and 1934. Boyle served two terms of imprisonment and was pregnant during both sentences. McCoy demonstrates how during this era women prisoners in Boyle's circumstances managed to deploy reform ideologies premised on maternal ideals prevalent at the time as a strategy of survival and resistance.

*Four Unruly Women* is a disturbing but captivating read. It is academically rigorous and compellingly written. Consider the following four exceptional features of this book:

*Four Unruly Women* documents the inhumanity suffered by these four individual unruly women. However, the book very effectively weaves the particularity of their stories into a much broader critique of the inextricable connection between social marginalization, poverty, classism, sexism and the modern state's conceptions of punishment, reform and criminality.

Second, one of this book's most important contributions is its focus on the history of *women's* incarceration in Canada. As McCoy observes, "legal historians in Canada have largely ignored the experiences of incarcerated women" (P. 1). This gap, McCoy suggests, obscures a full understanding of the true nature of the modern penitentiary.

Third, *Four Unruly Women*, is laudable for its methodological approach and meticulous research. McCoy relies upon multiple recorded sources to piece together the stories of these women. He examines prison disciplinary reports, punishment registers, wardens' reports and other official penitentiary reports, medical records, and testimony from the penal reform commission conducted between 1849 and 1850 – aggregating the information across months, years and

decades in order to provide a more robust depiction of what occurred and why.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, is the book's focus on the remarkable resistance demonstrated by these women. As McCoy notes in his introduction, he chose these four women in particular because they truly were the unruly and unmanageable. Far from an account simply of the victimization suffered by these imprisoned women, this book is an acknowledgement of the ways in which their resistance to the oppression they faced helped to shift and inform understandings of punishment and criminality.

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