

Keith Laybourn (ed), *The Ascott Martyrs: Why did the rural establishment imprison sixteen women and two babies in 1873?* Oxford: Ascott Press, 2023, 30 pp, £14.99 or £7.99 for a Kindle edition.

This book tells the little-known story of sixteen women resisting the rural establishment in Ascott-under-Wychwood, an Oxfordshire village, during a time when there was great fear that the rise of the working class would destabilise the country. The story focuses on the Ascott women who demonstrated their support for the striking agricultural labourers protesting at their low wages. On 12 May 1873, a group of women confronted two young men who had arrived in the village to replace some of the striking local men's labour. Following this confrontation, a complaint was made resulting in sixteen of the women being prosecuted and sentenced to prison (including two nursing mothers and their babies), causing outrage in the area. Attempts were made by trades union and other sympathisers to reverse the harsh sentences. Differing accounts of the events were presented, with both sides using the national and local media to further their argument, generating considerable interest, including from the government.

Each chapter in the book is written by different authors who present and contextualise their perspective of this story, with the editor providing an introduction and conclusion. In the opening chapter we hear how, and why, the women became involved in the protest, their arrest, the court hearing and the use of legislation. The experiences and testimonies of the women involved during their imprisonment are described, alongside the counter responses to claims made by the women and their sympathisers. Subsequent chapters elaborate on these and associated themes. The roles of organisations ranging from the National Agricultural Labourers Union (NALU), the Anglican Church, the courts and the press are described; and the specific attitudes taken by landowners and tenant farmers are contrasted with those of the labourers and the women directly involved and their sympathisers. Nineteenth-century agricultural unrest is contextualised, as is the growth and work of the NALU. Incorporated into this discussion is the respective positions of agricultural labourers and women in rural communities. Additionally, comparisons between the Tolpuddle martyrs and the Ascot martyrs are explored, highlighting the misogyny of the nineteenth-century Trades Union movement. The attitudes of farmers and the rural establishment demonstrate the economic hierarchy of the farming community, expose their fear of rural unrest, and explain their support of the criminal prosecution of the women.

Class divisions are explained, with the Anglican Church aligning with the political interests of the landed gentry and tenant farmers, whereas Nonconformists were closer to the agricultural workers, with the officers being 'drawn from their respective classes'. Despite the NALU and other sympathisers of the rural poor being organised, they were up against the powerful wealthy establishment. Light is thrown on the structure of rural life and the book illustrates how poverty and inequality were perpetuated by the effective networking of the establishment.

The use of legislation such as the 1834 New Poor Law Amendment Act is explored to show how the rights of citizens in rural communities worked in practice. Likewise, the limited trades union protection under the legal framework of the nineteenth century posed another obstacle to the rights of citizens. Inadequate legislation combined with the appointment of clerics as magistrates or Poor Law officials could determine life courses for many working-

class defendants, as demonstrated in the case of the striking men and the women protestors at Ascott.

A detailed picture of nineteenth-century rural life is portrayed in these chapters with an all-encompassing context of the women's protest, before, during and after the event. Each chapter enhances our historical understanding of the multifarious factors that contributed to the prosecution of the women and the aftermath. The use of primary sources, secondary literature and folklore keep the story alive, and anyone tempted by it would benefit from reading the appendices alongside the relevant chapters. Letters and statements in these appendices bring the story to life, reflecting the divisions in the community, the national and local interest, and the impact and power of the networking establishment.

There is a wealth of information to absorb with different perspectives and interlinking themes, but the book provides a logical structure and something for everyone. It is a fine well-developed construction with clear analysis of a lost history that exposes misogyny, class privilege and the power of the establishment. The authors should be congratulated for telling a story that has both national and local interest, and which still resonates today. It should perhaps be made into a film, as Tolpuddle was.

Dr Annie Skinner, East Oxford, 2023