Cultivation in Captivity: Gender, Class and Reform in the Promotion and Practice of Women’s Prison Gardening in England, 1900–1939

In 1929 the magazine of the National Gardens Guild published an article on recent work by its Honorary Treasurer, Margaret Stubbs, about her gardening classes at Holloway Prison:

From a small class held in the privacy of a cell-like room inside the prison, Miss Stubbs enlarged her ideas (or it might more truthfully be said the ideas of the prison officials) and introduced practical gardening out-of-doors. Throughout the summer a class of women has been engaged in cultivating flower beds and borders, and in addition to gifts from private persons, a number of nurserymen and seedsmen … has come forward with donations of plants and seeds.1

Although this was reported in 1929, it has clear resonances with a growing number of more recent initiatives in the UK designed to encourage horticultural training within prisons such as Greener on the Outside for Prisons (GOOP) and The Clink charity gardens.2 Since 1983 the Royal Horticultural Society has awarded the Windlesham Trophy for the best-kept men’s and women’s prison garden in England and Wales.3 Established by the former Chairman of the Parole Board, Lord Windlesham, the prize is intended ‘to develop prisoners’ sense of

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worth and encourage garden excellence within the prison community’. This concept of the restorative power of gardening and the prison as a site for horticultural training for those kept at Her Majesty’s pleasure appears at first glance to be a recent, progressive position in line with the emergence of other late twentieth-century organisations such as Thrive (established in 1978), which viewed gardening as an effective therapeutic activity for marginalised groups. However, as the opening quotation attests, this approach has an earlier historical foundation in early twentieth-century schemes run by some prison governors and by voluntary organisations in association with the prison service – the most prominent and lasting of which was the Prison Gardening Association, whose ambition was to place horticultural lecturers in every prison and Borstal institution in England and Wales.

The PGA (formed in 1928) and its parent organisation the National Gardens Guild (founded in 1914 as the London Gardens Guild) were among many voluntary organisations dating from the late nineteenth century which campaigned for gardens and green space as part of urban social, sanitary and aesthetic reform. The Guild’s mission was to promote ‘horticulture as an adjunct to social work’ and, later, to foster a ‘civic spirit’ through the cultivation of flowers; its work followed in the footsteps of other, longer-established efforts to ‘brighten’ and ‘beautify’ back yards in poor urban areas from the 1860s, including those sponsored by Lord Shaftesbury, the Kyrle Society, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association and the ‘One & All’ Agricultural and Horticultural Association. Very often these were Christian in origin and, as Lucinda Matthews Jones reminds us in her exploration of the spiritual imagination of the early University Settlement movement in London, ‘brightness

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and shadows were potent metaphors in late Victorian and Edwardian culture’. Settlements, in which usually middle-class intellectuals became good neighbours with the poor, were ‘nurseries’ for those who intended to enter social work. The London Guild had itself grown out of a failed attempt to establish a London Gardens Settlement in south London and many of its members were Quakers, Fabians and other Socialists who had connections to English Settlements and to the National Council for Social Service. Margaret Stubbs (1866–1937) was herself formerly a worker with the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement in London. Although there is not space to examine them here, we position women’s prison gardening very much within the context of these initiatives to improve and brighten the lives of the poor; prison gardening was also allied to the wider ‘beautification’ movement, which had civic in addition to moral and sanitary aims, exemplified in the work of Ada Salter, former Bermondsey Settlement social worker, first female Labour Mayoress in Britain (1919), chair of the LCC Parks Committee, and one-time President of the National Gardens Guild. As such examples suggest, women often played prominent, active roles in these organisations and the work of Miss Stubbs – ‘pioneer woman lecturer to the Prison Gardening Association’ – and her successors at the PGA continued in a tradition of religiously and politically motivated social work. Stubbs’s work within the prison service exemplified the ‘new sense of partnership’.

between statutory and voluntary workers’ observed by Elizabeth Macadam in 1934. It also demonstrates how, partly under women’s influence, gardens and gardening became part of the armoury of an increasingly professionalized social-service movement between the wars.

Our aim here is twofold: firstly, to examine the nature of horticultural instruction for women and how it was distinctively gendered in comparison with the gardening activity prescribed for male prisoners and, secondly, to explore the narratives at play in teaching the poor women who made up most of the prison population to appreciate nature through gardening. We discuss this in conjunction with contemporary practice in comparable institutions such as reformatories and schools and, along the way, highlight the little-known horticultural and social work of the lecturers and offer a glimpse of the women who gardened (or were encouraged to do so) behind prison walls. The central focus is on Holloway Prison in London, where the PGA was active from the late-1920s, but we also consider Aylesbury Prison in Buckinghamshire, where in the early 1900s a gardening scheme was managed in-house, and later by the PGA.

In the nineteenth century, gardening and other forms of outdoor labour were undertaken in a variety of institutions including asylums, reformatories and prisons as part of the regime. It is worth noting that ‘prison horticulture has been an element of detention

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10 Bernard Harris, The Origins of the British Welfare State: Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800–1945 (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2004), 188. There is a large historical literature on female philanthropy and voluntary activism and its role in their political advancement, professional practice and shaping statutory legislation; for continuity and change between the wars, see Eve Colpus, Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World: Between Self and Other (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
facilities throughout history, including prisoner-of-war and internment camps’. A central role of such agriculture was to provide a cheap source of food combined with the discipline of labour but towards the twentieth century this shifted towards a greater sense of gardening as a healthy and reforming activity. In their history of prison horticulture, focused on the US, Waliczek and Zajicek note that ‘throughout the twentieth century, reform-minded prison wardens attempted to use horticulture as a means of creating more humane conditions and as a form of inmate rehabilitation through meaningful work, improved diet and “fresh air treatment”’. The idea of environmental beauty combined with ornamental and productive gardens and healthy outdoor spaces also underpinned Garden City philosophy and design from the end of the nineteenth century.

There was a strong moral element attached to education in the open-air, which like garden city ideals and urban gardening campaigns reflected wider concerns around physical deterioration, moral depravity and urban poverty. There are clear parallels with Geraldine Cadbury’s Home Office work with young offenders between the wars. She praised the farm colony set up in Warwickshire in 1818, ‘which hired out boys from county gaols to work on local farms, with the aim of reforming rather than punishing them’. Cadbury was not alone in holding this idea. As well as advocating farming as part of the curriculum in open-air schools, in 1915 James Campbell also noted that in his work at reformatory schools for boys

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he had found that ‘the boy benefits morally by work in his garden, and his physical improvement is decidedly apparent’.  

However, as is clear from these examples horticulture as a reforming practice was highly gendered and predominately seen as suitable for men and boys, whereas women and girls were given indoor tasks with a domestic focus such as sewing and cooking. Michelle Cale explains that the female inmates of nineteenth-century reformatories did little outdoor labour ‘beyond the occasional experiment of allowing them patches of flower garden to cultivate’. Agricultural work was intended to ‘toughen up’ the boys while the girls were thought to ‘require softening’, having been hardened by street-life, and indoor domestic pursuits were generally thought ‘more appropriate as part of their preparation for a feminine life’. Inebriate reformatories, created for those classed as habitual drunkards as an alternative to traditional prisons, were an exception to this rule. At Duxhurst Industrial Farm Colony, founded in 1895 by Lady Isabella Somerset, women were taught kitchen- and flower-gardening on a cottage-garden model to aid in their recovery. Aylesbury Convict Prison, from 1901 a female State Inebriate Reformatory, also had both vegetable and flower gardens in the early 1900s. This was a ‘last resort’ institution to which refractory or violent women from the Certified Reformatories could be sent. As they were considered a ‘very rough collection of women’, their improvement in both ‘health and temper’ through kitchen

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16 Ibid.


gardening represented an attempt to soften or feminise them.\textsuperscript{19} As this article will demonstrate, even when gardening within reforming and carceral institutions emerged in the 1900s as a suitable occupation for women, it was still gendered in terms of the language used. This highlighted its nurturing and feminine nature, and the type of light horticulture practised, which focused on pot-plants, window-boxes, floral bedding and, in the case of inebriates, kitchen gardening, rather than the more utilitarian, and economically valuable, large-scale vegetable gardening that required physical exertion and was still reserved for men.

Despite a growing interest in the history of garden spaces beyond the domestic, the history of prison gardens and gardening in Britain has generally been overlooked. However, our attention to institutional gardening and its relationship to wider cultural, social and medical concerns forms part of a growing literature on institutional, manufacturing and public gardens such as hospitals, pubs, factories, schools and urban parks.\textsuperscript{20} It also reflects a


greater attention to horticultural spaces that are not associated with named garden designers and hopes to highlight the cultural importance of more everyday, makeshift gardening practice. As Malcolm Dick and Elaine Mitchell noted recently, ‘there has been a retreat from a concentration on the aesthetics of design towards seeing gardens and the activity of gardening within wider social, economic, political and cultural contexts’. As they emphasise, alongside scientific, intellectual and other influences, social class and gender have shaped the creation and development of gardens.

One common obstacle faced by historians when trying to consider how these places were used and who might have been involved in the activity of gardening is the lack of extant archival material; prisons and prisoners present additional hurdles. Our principal sources here are the Reports of the Commissioners of Prisons and the publications and dispersed records of the Gardens Guilds and Prison Gardens Association, supported with evidence from the national, horticultural and medical press. Not surprisingly, articles often anonymised the prison or withheld geographical detail but it is clear from other records that in both rural and urban areas, prisons often had a range of gardens, including those that served as the public face of the institution and private plots for governors and chaplains, and that prisoners often worked in these in addition to any productive ground. Exercise yards occupied large areas of the remaining outdoor space. Our interest in this article is less on design or the organisation of space but rather addresses the teaching of gardening to female inmates and what convicted women did in prison gardens. Nevertheless, the ‘brightening’ effect of relatively small areas of ground was conceived very much in relation to the wider prison landscape: in particular, it


was hoped that these little-photographed plots would provide, for some, an alternative to the bleak and heavily supervised space of the exercise yard, as portrayed in an early twentieth-century view of Wormwood Scrubs Prison (see Fig. 1).  

‘A healthy occupation of the women’: Gardening and the reform of female inmates

In the early twentieth century philanthropic work in prisons by visiting committees and mission workers sometimes included gifts of plants to ‘beautify’ prison chapels and gardens, for example at Holloway and Bristol in 1912. Voluntary activity by ‘ladies’ associations’ belonged to a tradition of reformatory and welfare work with women prisoners begun by Elizabeth Fry and Sarah Martin in the early 1800s. From the turn of the twentieth century, efforts to reform women through friendship and lectures on a range of subjects began also to include practical gardening. As noted above, at the inebriate reformatory at Aylesbury Prison, which like those at Holloway and Bristol was one of several female prisons experimenting with a ‘modified’ Borstal system, inmates were taught gardening in addition to domestic work and their regular schooling. Aylesbury soon had a large kitchen garden with a flower border and greenhouse worked entirely by ‘the girls’. By the late-1920s they were allowed to cultivate and plant their own gardens as they pleased. The horticultural work with women

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24 Report of the Commissioners of Prisons...for the year ended 31 March 1912 (London, HMSO, 1912), Cd. 6406, 6407, XLIII.345, 43, appendix, 13, 57.


27 Report of the Commissioners of Prisons, 1912, appendix, 162.

28 Report of the Commissioners of Prisons...for... 1929 (London, HMSO, 1931), Cmd. 3868, XVI.909, 16, 35.
continued until, in 1939, the Prison Commissioners transferred all who had formed its gardening class to Holloway and the lectures ceased. This was probably in advance of an unexecuted scheme to close both prisons to women and establish a new, more open women’s prison and Borstal in Surrey.

From the early 1920s a handful of male Gardens Guild members, including some who had been gaoled for Conscientious Objection and so had experience of prison life and hard labour, had been lecturing on vegetable growing in male prisons, with twenty-two prisons and three Borstals included in this scheme by 1923. Margaret Stubbs was also lecturing in prisons for two years prior to the establishment of the PGA but, in a gendered pattern which continued through the 1930s, her female pupils were in the main taught ornamental gardening and desk-based horticultural science rather than the productive horticulture and agriculture which characterised the physical labour undertaken by the men. Although the PGA retained its title, HM Prison Commission requested that the new Association be fully incorporated into the Guild as the Prison Garden Sub-Committee and in January 1929 it was making arrangements to cover thirty-eight Prison and Borstal Institutions throughout the country, the Home Office promising to match each £1 raised by the Guild. By September fifteen institutions had signed up and the aim was now to appoint qualified lecturers in every prison and Borstal in England and Wales. Stubbs, the only female lecturer, was appointed as Lecturer at Holloway and the post at Aylesbury was taken by Philip Mann.

Holloway Prison was originally the House of Correction for the City of London; it became the first female-only local prison in 1902 and was later notoriously associated with the incarceration and force-feeding of Suffragettes. In the early 1920s the Governor reported that a considerable number of Holloway’s inmates were ‘senile debilitated women’ with a great number of convictions and was convinced that many committed petty offences in order to secure a prison sentence and thus avoid the workhouse. These women were allowed a relaxed regime with simple light work. For the younger women committed to Holloway, the Chaplain advised that it would be beneficial if technical education could be provided by qualified teachers in the evenings, and (knowing ‘how the poor live and feed’) recommended cookery classes. These were in addition to the regular lectures on health, nursing and sanitation given by ‘lady visitors’ from 1904. As with attempts to ‘beautify’ the places where the poor lived there was an underlying class element to these initiatives, where the upper and middle classes assumed a level of agency in the lack of domestic skills attributed to some groups of working women.

This was the regime into which Margaret Stubbs entered as prison-garden lecturer in about 1927–28. A ‘special gardening class’ was started in 1929 under the auspices of the new PGA and the ‘gardening teacher’, presumably Stubbs, took over all the prison flower beds. This resulted, the Governor reported, in ‘a very marked improvement in the appearance of the grounds and at the same time it has provided a healthy occupation of the women during the

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summer evenings’.

At this time the gaol held an annual average of 278 prisoners under the charge of female officers and nurses. As noted, many were alcoholic or ‘weak minded’.

Ninety-seven of the 165 inmates held in 1929 had been charged with stealing, the remainder with drunkenness, prostitution, child neglect and other crimes associated with poverty, and their sentences ranged from eight months to under two weeks. As the Governor and other authorities noted, sentences of this kind ‘destroyed any hope’ there might be to reclaim them and greater efforts should be made to keep girls in particular outside prison and Borstal walls.

Access to gardening was then partly an attempt to create a brighter, less prison-like environment for these women but their short stays must have frustrated more ambitious programmes of education and reform.

‘Softer, gentler, kinder’: Prison gardening and gender

The early twentieth-century attention to gardens and gardening in prisons exemplified in the work of the PGA was rooted in the reforming potential of contact with nature and growing things and the moral and mental improvement to be achieved through ‘beautifying dull and ugly places’.

The aim of reform through beauty and contact with nature led to the idea that prison gardens also had a practical function in providing new skills and rational exercise in a healthier, greener environment as part of attempts to reduce reoffending. As an editorial in The Guild Gardener put it, ‘gardening and gardening instruction are recognised by the authorities as part of a system designed to prevent recidivism or habitual crime’.

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38 Report of the Commissioners of Prisons, 1929, 38.
40 Report of the Commissioners of Prisons...for... 1925–26 (London, HMSO, 1927), Cmd. 2826, XII.1, 42.
43 ‘A Prodigal Son’, Guild Gardener (March 1929), 41.
The PGA was assisted in its work in brightening prisons by Quaker and other philanthropists. Nurseryman Joseph Cheal, of Cheals of Crawley, a Vice-Chairman of the PGA, supplied many of the organisations’ plants, particularly to women’s prisons. At the start of the scheme he sent a dozen rambler roses to Holloway ‘to help in the brightening of the grounds’, where inmates were making a flower garden; later he sent perennials for the gardens of an unidentified women’s prison. Here the choice of plants, such as roses, is key to understanding the relationship between beauty and moral improvement which was an underlying feature of women’s prison-gardening schemes and much urban reform in this period.

Dr Selina Fox, Governor of Aylesbury Prison (deputy governor from 1916 and subsequently the first female prison governor) found also that the depression suffered by long-sentence inmates could be alleviated by ‘keeping their minds occupied with handwork, educational lectures, gardening and the keeping of livestock’. Although this applied to both men and women, there is a sense that female prisoners would benefit from indoor and outdoor floral gardening rather than the heavier and less genteel vegetable growing and agricultural labour undertaken by men. This perhaps also reflects wider views regarding gardens as exemplifying the curative powers of tamed nature, which emerged as part of the therapeutic regime of the nineteenth-century lunatic asylum. Transgressions from the tranquil and cheerful behaviour that such spaces were meant to engender could end up being pathologised. As Elaine Showalter states, when a group of female patients at the Fisher...
Asylum for the Criminally Insane ‘ripped up every flower the minute it showed its head above ground’, their action was considered a sign of ‘severe psychopathology’.  

This was presumably considered both ‘unfeminine’ and the opposite of the outcome expected by the medical profession. The concept of ordered, domesticated nature as therapeutic or reforming also extended to the concept of gardening where the inmate took on the role of taming nature him or herself.

From 1934, Mrs S. K. Ratcliffe (1871–1962), a Quaker, led a compulsory weekly gardening class for a dozen long-sentence women in an unnamed prison near London. In the winter Katie Ratcliffe taught in the classroom with a ‘certain percentage of actual gardening’ at other times. The women had individual plots ‘and more or less enjoy filling them with flowers and emptying them of weeds’. Two strips of waste ground along sections of prison wall were cleared and planted with flowering shrubs at the expense of a ‘fairy godmother’ benefactor. The prison authorities also prepared a rectangle as ‘a yard improvement’, which the women filled with bulbs in a formal pattern. The prison had no enthusiasm for Ratcliffe’s plans to cultivate more of the prison ground, however. Instead, the women made sink gardens and hanging baskets, not always with success. ‘We have, of course, layered carnations, pruned roses, grown flowers from seeds or cuttings’, she wrote. But the women’s interest was always highest, she said, for ‘some issue of the day: soil erosion, wheat experiments, hybridisation, plant pests, etc’. This suggests that the women themselves were interested in broader horticultural themes than the more limited and gendered floral concerns favoured, in this case, by the prison. Similarly, other motives may have been at play in other cases which

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49 Hickman, Therapeutic Landscapes, 80.

were at odds with philanthropic and official concerns regarding the beneficial role of gardening. Joanna Kelley, Governor of Holloway from 1959 to 1966, recorded the tale of one prisoner who requested open-air work to improve her health on the grounds that her job in the laundry was getting her down. However, when pressed, she admitted ‘that her real reason for wanting to work in the gardens was that she was due to be released in a few weeks and that she thought she would be able to make a better start if she looked fit and sun-tanned when she left prison’. Although this example dates from the 1960s, it does establish that prisoners could gain benefits from gardening on their own terms.

However, convicted women and – especially – their babies were often described by observers in terms which compared them to plants in need of care and training to become healthy and upright subjects. Holloway housed the first prison creche nationally, with gardens for ‘prison babies’, who slept outside in good weather, mirroring practice for children in open-air schools and tuberculosis hospitals. ‘So long as the infants are in prison care’, wrote journalist Harold Begbie about Holloway in 1926, ‘they thrive exceedingly. When the mother is set free, however, and returns to the difficult places of civilisation, they wilt and wither and die’. Safer for mother and child, he said, was ‘the modern prison’. A special class was set up for women aged twenty-one to twenty-five, who were employed in their own hall on laundry-work, cookery and gardening as well as schoolwork. This was designed to keep them apart from the corrupting influence of repeat offenders and by 1936 the young prisoners were located in a new wing, with their own garden to look after.

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54 Report of the Commissioners of Prisons, 1929, 38.
But, as noted above, not all of the inmates were young. Ratcliffe explained of her female students that ‘these are not young girls’ and she nursed ‘no fantastic hope that any will go into horticulture when at liberty, or even become enthusiastic gardeners. But our contact has lovely human results’. Such comments indicate that the kinds of social work performed by PGA lecturers had the more realistic and subtle aims of trying to engage and socialise the women. This was less ambitious than some in authority, who – with mainstream public opinion in mind – focussed on the power of gardens to transform criminal or immoral behaviour along more conventionally gendered lines. ‘Gardens in Prisons by a Prison Governor’, an undated article quite possibly by Dr Fox and probably distributed as a PGA fundraising pamphlet, recalled seeing a woman

gently touching a Michaelmas Daisy, one of a great feathery mass against a cold, grey wall. She said very quietly to it, “I shall not see you next year. I shall be outside but I shall think of you.” The governor told me she had been one of the worst trouble-makers in the prison, until she had been put to work in the garden. Since then, she had become absorbed in her flowers, and imbued by their beauty, and her whole attitude to life had become, softer, gentler, kinder.

Such accounts make clear the belief in the reformatory potential of the garden and its power to ‘soften’ women ‘coarsened’ by poverty and crime but are of limited use as guides to actual practice. As was noted at the time, the inmates said they liked coming to Miss Stubbs’ lectures, ‘because they are not lectures at all, but just talks’; moreover the women were not obliged to attend her lessons but, ‘seeing as the alternative is remaining alone in their cells, they are glad of the diversion’ and thus respite from prison routines. An article, probably by

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Stubbs, suggests that she saw the reforming potential of introducing ‘beauty and interest’ not in terms of reforming the ‘criminal character’ (an idea to which she probably did not subscribe) but in quietly expanding her charges’ horizons. The ability of practical and desk-based lessons on nature, plants and gardening to effect small changes in the daily lives of those involved, and to mitigate the corrupting influences of the prison, is summarised by her statement, that ‘nothing made me so happy as to be told, as I often was, “We love the gardening class. It makes us forget where we are”’. 59

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century gardening programmes became commonplace in women’s prisons and Borstals in England and Wales. Initiated by prison visitors in consultation with prison authorities and, later by the Prison Gardening Association, these initiatives introduced gardening as social work for the moral, educational and physical reform of female inmates. In contrast to institutions for men, this took the form of light horticultural work with a domestic focus. How much prisoners gained from this in personal or practical terms is, for reasons we have described, difficult to gauge. But occasionally, as we have indicated, the actions and voices of prisoners are seen and heard, although heavily mediated by the authorities, the volunteer lecturers and the publications they appeared in. Ratcliffe singled out the lessons on botany and geography as being of particular interest to her students which, if true, could reflect their desire for a more academic education rather than the tedium of domestically focussed instruction. Practical gardening or at least contact with plants and earth does appear to have been an enjoyable activity for some women, perhaps because it offered space for creativity or relative autonomy. As Waliczek and Kajicek stress, ‘gardening has served inmates as a means of creative expression, but also as an expression of individual and cultural

59 ‘Gardening in Prisons by a Woman Teacher’, *Guild Gardener* (July 1935), 107.
identity, and as an act of resistance against incarceration and the rigid structures of the institution’.\textsuperscript{60} The role of gardening as an act of resistance is summarised by Nelson Mandela, who stated that, for him, ‘a garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it, offered a simple but enduring satisfaction. The sense of being the custodian of this small patch of earth offered a small taste of freedom’.\textsuperscript{61} However, for others, such as many of the female inmates of Holloway and Aylesbury Prisons in the early twentieth century, it seems to have offered little more than a temporary escape. This suggests that wider cultural and social concerns impacted upon the design, implementation and success of therapeutic prison gardening schemes and that attention to social and cultural history can offer lessons for those running current prison gardening programmes.

\textsuperscript{60} Waliczek and Zajicek, \textit{Urban Horticulture}, 181.

\textsuperscript{61} Nelson Mandela, \textit{The Long Walk to Freedom} (Boston, Little Brown, 1994), 582–3.