

Britain's Siberia

Mary Coutts's account of the asylum system

A Beveridge

Consultant Psychiatrist, Queen Margaret Hospital, Dunfermline, Fife, Scotland

ABSTRACT This paper examines a pamphlet entitled *Britain's Siberia. The High Statistics of Insanity Explained by a Certified Lunatic*. Research has revealed that the writer was Mary Coutts and that she had been a detained patient in the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. The paper analyses what Coutts had to say about her experiences and compares this to the official asylum records and what they reveal about her inmate stay. The paper also relates Coutts' account to that of other patients who have written about their experiences. As one of the few women to have left a record of life in the asylum, Coutts' story is of particular interest.

KEYWORDS *Britain's Siberia*, Mary Coutts, the patient perspective, wrongful confinement

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS No conflict of interests declared.

INTRODUCTION

In 1909 there appeared a curious pamphlet entitled *Britain's Siberia. The High Statistics of Insanity Explained by a Certified Lunatic*.¹ Although published anonymously, research reveals that the writer was Mary Coutts, a 48-year-old woman, who had recently spent four months as a detained patient in the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. In writings by people experiencing mental illness, accounts by women are much less common than those by men.^{2,3} Even among women, accounts tend to relate to experiences in exclusively private asylums, for example, Georgina Weldon's (1878) *The History of My Orphanage; or The Outpourings of an Alleged Lunatic*, and Louisa Lowe's (1883) *The Bastilles of England; or The Lunacy Laws at Work*. In contrast, Mary Coutts was writing about a large public institution, the Aberdeen Royal Asylum, one of Scotland's Royal Charity Asylums which, unlike their English counterparts, catered for both private and pauper patients. As one of the few female Scottish voices from the asylum, Coutts's account is of much interest. This paper will examine the pamphlet, consider the asylum records of Mary Coutts, and ask how *Britain's Siberia* should be interpreted.

BRITAIN'S SIBERIA

At the time of the publication of *Britain's Siberia*, Mary Coutts was a 48-year-old housewife. As a young woman she had worked as a machinist at the local asylum for the blind, but by the time of the 1901 census, she was described as living with her husband, George, and their two children in a tenement in one of the more respectable districts of Aberdeen.⁴ Her husband was a cashier and, in recent times, the family had been able to move from a two to a three bedroom flat.

It is of significance that both Mary's mother and her grandmother had a history of mental illness. Her mother had several admissions to the Aberdeen Asylum,⁵ the first when Mary would have been about eight years old. Her mother was eventually moved to the City District Asylum at Kingseat, but died within a week of her transfer in 1905. Thus Mary would have had personal contact with mental illness and would have been familiar with the role of the asylum. This may well have influenced her attitude to her own confinement.

Mary Coutts based her pamphlet on her experiences of her first admission to the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. This admission lasted from 18 March to 14 July 1908. As the title suggests, Coutts gave a highly critical account of her time in the Aberdeen Asylum. She complained about the lack of treatment, the brutality of the nursing attendants and the incompetence of the medical staff. She also used the pamphlet to claim that she was wrongfully confined. From the outset, she pictured herself on a special, if not divine, mission to tell the world about the iniquities of the asylum system:

It is said that nothing happens by chance, and I am convinced no chance placed me there. God does not always choose his instruments from among the righteous; and I can now furnish in my own person, indisputable proof of the utter futility of every section of Lunacy Law, and lift the curtain on the cruel farce of medical skill and care.⁶

Coutts then went on to catalogue the failings of the asylum. First, she complained about the absence of therapy:

The first and most amazing secret I surprised [sic] was that there is no treatment, and, what is more deplorable, no cure attempted, and, terrible thought

Correspondence to A Beveridge
Consultant Psychiatrist, Queen Margaret Hospital, Dunfermline, Fife, KY12 0SU

tel. +44 (0)1383 623 623

fax. +44 (0)1383 627 044

e-mail

Allan.Beveridge@faht.scot.nhs.uk

– not desired. The patients are simply prisoners, leading the most desolate and unnatural lives it is possible for human beings to live, and lives calculated to keep them insane and drive them more so.⁷

Not only was there no treatment, she protested, the asylum actually made patients worse. This is a common theme in the writings by the mentally ill, as is the comparison of the asylum with prison.⁸ Inmates were confined on a compulsory basis and attempts to communicate with the outside world were curtailed. The Scottish lunacy laws allowed staff to read all of the letters by patients and withhold any that were deemed unsuitable to send.⁹ The asylum world, Coutts maintained, was shrouded in secrecy.

Coutts lambasted the doctors who ‘attempt nothing, but do not own to this’.¹⁰ She maintained that a visit from the asylum superintendent was a rare occurrence. She did concede that a second doctor visited the wards twice daily but complained that his visits lasted only a few minutes, and that he ignored the patients who were incapable of communicating with him. She was angered by the respect accorded to doctors. As she wrote: ‘the degree of MD apparently confers the distinction of being exempt from criticism. Let me ask this question: Who sows more wild oats than medical students? Yet this degree seems to place them at once immaculate on a pedestal’.¹¹ The high standing of doctors meant that when patients complained they were not believed. Further complaints were taken as evidence that they were deluded.¹²

Coutts maintained that the asylum system crushed patients. She wrote: ‘signs of sanity or independence of thought were promptly repressed and discouraged’.¹³ She also claimed that: ‘Everything is subservient to the smooth working of the establishment . . . The patients are a mere detail’.¹⁴ For the sane, their confinement with the insane amounted to a slow death of the intellect.¹² She complained that there was no attempt to divide patients by their condition, and that the mildest cases were placed with the most severe. She observed:

Nervous, depressed, inoffensive creatures, old ladies merely suffering from forgetfulness of age, and the absolutely sane have to endure all the racket of those afflicted with the worst forms of dementia, and from thirty to forty patients are confined within the four walls of one room.¹⁴

She complained about the noise of the asylum especially at night. She proclaimed: ‘I can truthfully say that I never had a night’s rest in the place. A quiet night was a thing unknown . . . I hid the fact that I did not sleep because I was afraid of being drugged’.¹⁵ She described the bathing routine:

The patients got a bath once a week . . . It was always a dreadful day, as the patients were all excited through rough handling. To one poor little woman in

particular it was a terrible ordeal, as it was a common occurrence for her to be dragged along the floor from the bathroom and stuck in a chair at the breakfast table in a dead faint or fit.¹⁶

She inveighed against the arbitrary nature of asylum rules: ‘the asylum attendants could break the law with impunity, while the patients were held responsible for what was a phase of their affliction’.¹⁷ She complained that pauper or ‘parish’ patients were made to work, and that their labour was exploited.¹⁴ When they recovered, Coutts contended, they were still kept in the asylum because they were valuable workers. She observed: ‘Some of the women work in the kitchens from five o’clock in the morning till 8 pm. Fifteen hours, with meals snatched while at work – and 8 pm means bed-time’.¹⁸ Female patients were also employed in the sewing of asylum clothes, including the attendants’ uniforms. The asylum, she concluded, is ‘a huge commercial enterprise, deriving its income from sad afflictions of human beings’.¹⁴

Coutts reserved her severest criticism for the attendants, whom she described as ‘ignorant and tactless men and women, whose strongest recommendations are their capabilities in the way of brute force’.¹² She claimed to have witnessed many assaults by staff on patients, and even that a patient had been ‘murdered’. She described how a female patient had tried to squeeze through a window but asphyxiated when her head became trapped in the opening. She judged that the patient had been ‘murdered through neglect’.¹³

Coutts portrayed herself as standing up to the system and constantly querying staff about their actions. As she wrote: ‘my only diversion was criticising and showing up the weak spots of the establishment. I am glad to say that I did it fearlessly and openly’.¹⁴ For example, she recorded:

I noticed that the doctor was sometimes at a loss what to call the patients, and I said to him: ‘I see it takes you all your time to remember their names far less their diseases.’ He was angry, and very often very angry at the things I said, and I was pleased to see it, as it was an acknowledgment of my sanity.¹⁴

In another encounter with the medical staff, she wrote:

When the second doctor examined me physically and mentally soon after my entrance, I saw that I stood every test. For days afterwards I kept asking him how he had classed me, and he always replied that he hadn’t classed me yet.¹⁶

Coutts recorded standing up for a young female patient who had been assaulted by an attendant, and she also mentioned putting an excitable patient to bed when the attendants failed to act. She described keeping ‘under observation’ another patient who had been ill-treated by

the attendants. Of another inmate, she states: 'It may seem immense conceit to say so, but I think I could have cured her myself'.¹⁶ She maintained that she had 'experimented a little with some of the patients' and proved to her own satisfaction that she could 'aid in the recovery of the curable'.¹⁶ She clearly saw herself on a mission and averred: 'no sane woman shall suffer as I suffered, nor shed such bitter tears, while I can say a word to prevent it'.¹⁷ Of her fellow-inmates, she wrote that 'there was more wit and wisdom among their damaged brains than among the entire staff'.¹⁵ Again this is a familiar conceit, the notion that the mad are wiser than the sane.

'Wrongful confinement'

The latter part of *Britain's Siberia* was given over to Mary Coutts's own case and her belief that she was wrongfully confined. She began by stating that: 'It is against the law to sign a certificate on facts communicated by others . . . Neither my husband nor any of my friends ever dreamt of putting me into an asylum'.¹⁹ She went on:

Forcible entrance was made into my home while I was peacefully employed there. I was kidnapped in broad daylight, in full public view, and no one dared interfere, because a police uniform was considered to be the garb of virtue. I was placed in the asylum on the representations of the Head Constable who had wronged me deeply, and in that wrong had committed a most daring fraud . . . Two detectives, James Dey and Alexander Clark, and two women named Masson took part in this little drama which was enacted in public, and at which I was personated on November 13th, 1907.¹⁹

She admitted that she sent the Head Constable 'a few postcards plainly setting forth the fraud he had committed'¹⁹ and maintained that this was the reason she was sent to the asylum. She stated that she wrote to the Superintendent at Scotland Yard on 15 March 1908 asking for his protection, but received no reply. She also claimed that her husband wrote to Scotland Yard, but, again, there was no response. Appeals were made to magistrates and various local officials. She wrote that Dr Reid, the medical superintendent of the Aberdeen Asylum, refused to release her 'though perfectly aware of my sanity'.²⁰ She added: 'The fraud committed by Head Constable Anderson was pretended to be my delusion'.²⁰

Coutts stated that up until May 1908 her husband and friends made efforts to liberate her. On 7 May, she claimed, a telegram was sent to the Home Secretary requesting her release and 'for an investigation into the fraud'.²⁰ This was followed by a letter on 12 May and another two letters, 'praying and beseeching aid'.²⁰ She observed:

The Government has imprisoned nearly 400 women for political offences, but when a police official, who

makes the most dangerous of all criminals, goes off the rails you will find that the Public Prosecutor has gone from home for an indefinite period without leaving any address.²⁰

She recorded being interviewed on three occasions by Dr McPherson, a lunacy commissioner from Edinburgh. She was asked if she would write to anyone if she was released and she admitted that she gave her an evasive answer. She was not released and she claimed that she 'was never meant to be released until my spirit was broken or my mind destroyed'.²¹

A fortnight before her release she was taken to another ward and told she was to be transferred to the City District Asylum as her husband had refused to pay. She confessed that: 'I broke quite down under the hopelessness of my position, and, from sheer misery, wept all night, and was quite ill'.²¹ It will be remembered that Mary's mother had been transferred to the District Asylum and died a week later. Perhaps Mary remembered this and thought it would be her fate too.

On 7 July the Scottish Office sent a letter, stating that she was properly detained in the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. On 11 July she escaped but was apprehended six hours later. She wrote:

The next day I was kept in a cell with double doors, where I was visited at intervals by Dr Reid, who tried to bully me into signing a document, one clause of which was to the effect that I would write to no one about my supposed wrongs.²²

She claimed that Dr Reid again prevailed upon her to sign the document but she refused. She wrote defiantly:

'I will sign nothing,' I replied. I could have been free at any time during the four months had I agreed to the conditions, but I decided for the greatest good to the greatest number, and I am at liberty to seek aid for those who are debarred from appealing for help on their own behalf.²²

However, on 14 July 1908, Mary Coutts was released. She claimed this had happened because 'a public petition for my release was mooted'.²² Following release, she wrote to Mr Asquith, asking if she was to receive 'any protection'. She received no answer and concluded that the Government 'had no existence when a mere British woman had need of it'.²² She then wrote to each member of the Asylum Board about 'being assaulted and asked for redress',²³ not for her own sake but for the other inmates. She claimed that one member acknowledged her letter and admitted that she had been illegally detained. As a result, her husband refused to pay the asylum bill, and the Board 'without admitting the accuracy of the statements, resolved that payment should not be pressed for'.²⁴

She also asked assistance from six members of Parliament. She wrote: 'I had great hopes of No. 6 because he was exposing lunacy scandals, and he was sufficiently interested to write and ask for a sight of the evidence.'²⁴ In response, she recorded:

I forwarded per registered packet twelve documents and a long and clear statement connecting them. He was in difficulties with the Government and I knew I was putting a powerful weapon into his hand that could be used for personal ends, as the documents happened to prove that British administration of justice was beneath contempt, but I risked it . . . his possession of them and the abandonment of the case against him synchronised.²⁴

Coutts concluded by predicting that the opening of 'the doors of these "Hells upon earth", will. . . , in just retribution, bring down the mighty from their seats'.²⁴ She noted that asylums were increasing in size throughout the country and saw this trend as representing 'the creation of office for a few individuals, and the consignment of thousands to a living grave'.²⁴ She ended on a stirring note:

Let the people rise in their might and extirpate this canker that is in their midst . . . Let the rescue work begin now. No need to wait to petition the repeal of Lunacy Law. Investigation will bring confirmation, the avalanche of public opinion the repeal.²⁵

In addition to the pamphlet, an abbreviated version of it appeared in the journal, *Justice*, which was published weekly in London between 1886 and 1925. A cutting of the article was appended to the case notes.

THE ASYLUM RECORD

Mary Coutts was admitted to the Aberdeen Royal Asylum on 18 March 1908.²⁶ She was described as a 47-year-old housewife, who lived with her husband, George, a cashier, at 108 Osborne Place in Aberdeen. This was stated to be her first attack and it was noted that her mother had died in the District Asylum. The first Medical Certificate recorded:

She is excitable & talkative. She has numerous delusions of persecution viz. she fancies that certain persons have a grudge against her & talk about her & that a burglar entered the house & Superintendent Strachan informs me that she writes postcards continually to the police, the Lord Provost etc. with numerous complaints.²⁷

The second certificate recorded that she:

. . . imagines two women are continually contriving to injure her, & that the police & the magistrates are treating her villainously . . . She takes a morbid interest

in famous trial cases . . . she has been trying to get the police to take action against the two women.²⁸

On admission she was noted to be 'practically T.T. [presumably teetotal]' and her bodily health was 'good on the whole'.²⁹ She was described as stoutly built and rather florid looking. The case notes recorded that her ideas of persecution extended back four or five years. They also noted that: 'in October 1907 she was summoned to Police Court for interfering with the two sisters Masson on the street: the case was adjourned'.³⁰ Coutts also mentioned this episode, but claimed that, far from being the aggressor, she was 'personated' by the two sisters. The case notes continued that Coutts

. . . gradually unfolded her story which reveals a state of mind of general suspiciousness involving the Lord Provost, the Town Clerk, the Chief Constable, the police force and detectives, two sisters employed in Marr, Wood & Co and the Blind Asylum Shop, etc. she asserts that the latter for years plotted against her family & particularly against her son who is very musical.³¹

On 24 March, an asylum physician recorded his impressions of Mrs Coutts:

She had not been many hours in the ward before she began to display a considerable tendency to interfere in matters such as the treatment of patients, their occupation & employment e.g. said Mrs Yorston was not being properly treated in the Ward and ought to have a room to herself etc. told other patients not to do any work – that the nurses were here to do the work – and persuaded some of them not to take covers off beds etc. as they usually do at night: she herself declares her intention of not doing any work in the place . . .³¹

The physician was also irked that she repeatedly challenged him:

She constantly presses me for a diagnosis of her case: wishes to know my qualifications & suggests I am not properly qualified: says she has diagnosed my case and that I am a humbug: she declares that as she is a certified patient she can do and say anything she likes and she evidently means to act up to her imagined privilege.³¹

On 27 March, the recording physician judged that Mrs Coutts was mildly depressed and 'evidently feeling her position here'.³¹ He added: 'when I asked her how she was, replied that she wondered I was not ashamed to ask and is generally rather snappy and illnatured in her remarks'.³¹ Mrs Coutts continued to exhibit what was described as a 'twisted mental attitude'. She informed the asylum physician that she was not going to speak to him anymore

because he was killing her husband. She also stated that she had been 'impersonated at a Police Court trial'.³¹

On 9 May she was recorded as complaining that asylum staff did not know their work and that they had no right to detain her beyond six weeks. She stated that the physician should have the sign F.O.O.L. after his name. She declared that 'she would never change her mind about the Massons or give any promise regarding her conduct towards them'.³² In addition, she consistently refused to do any work on the ward.

On 31 May, the case notes recorded: 'she said a few days ago that her case has now been brought before the Home Secretary and that he would see that justice was done to her & to us'.³² On 3 July she was moved to the Female North Block, and was reported to be 'much depressed at times, weeping to herself and refusing meals'.³² On 10 July, she was convinced that 'some letters she received recently had been steamed, opened and read'.³² On 12 July she escaped but was brought back the same day. Finally, on 14 July she was discharged home 'Not Improved' by authority of her husband.

On 21 March 1913, Mrs Coutts was readmitted to the Aberdeen Royal Asylum having 'got into trouble with the Police for claiming girls as her daughters' and having 'assaulted individuals who were her imaginary persecutors'.³³ She was judged to be a 'typical delusional case'. The admitting physician continued:

Morbid ideas much the same as when last here but more elaborated so that now her mind seems to be a tissue of delusions and a grandiose element has made its appearance. She believes that her mission is to reform the Lunacy Laws, that the whole Asylum system is a farce carried on to hoodwink the public and that all sorts of terrible abuses take place in these Institutions.³⁴

More specifically:

[She] has delusions of persecution against various people including Dr Reid and accuses the Post Office authorities of tampering with her letters. Has delusions about recent legislation e.g. the Insurance Bill and the presence of Germans and Roman Catholics in Aberdeen. Thinks that after pains from which she suffered were really other children born, who were immediately kidnapped by her nurse, and that her son has been persecuted and assaulted from an early age . . .³⁴

The asylum doctor recorded that Mrs Coutts boasted about her 'will power, her swimming and bicycling feats'.³⁴ She wanted to have nothing to do with her husband, whom she now distrusted. A further entry on 20 July 1913 gives a picture of how she was viewed by the medical staff:

[Mrs Coutts] is an unpleasant patient in a Ward as she poisons the minds of other patients against doctors & nurses and in this way does a good deal of harm. Is very abusive to doctors if they speak to her . . . She believes that patients here are all drugged and that this is done to make them excited so as to give an excuse for their detention. Thinks that nurses are distributed all over the country poisoning people and that they and the officials here are in the pay of Germany. This forms part of a scheme to bring about the downfall of the British Empire, what she calls the 'peril from within'.³⁴

On 30 July, she was transferred to Kingseat Asylum, where she was to remain until her death on 14 January 1935.

Curiously, the Aberdeen Royal Asylum admission registers³⁵ indicate that Mary Coutts was classed as a pauper on both her admissions, but she was listed as being a private patient. Her husband was certainly paying for her board, the equivalent of £30 per annum, then the lowest rate for private patients.³⁶ The minutes of the Asylum Board of Directors indicate that following Mrs Coutts's first discharge, her husband refused to pay the balance for her board because 'it was for the period . . . after he had made application for her discharge'.³⁷ This is a more prosaic explanation than Coutts's claim that her husband was responding to her allegations of asylum brutality. There is also no record of a 'public petition' to obtain her release.

Other asylum records cast light on some of Mrs Coutts's complaints about the institution. As regards her view that a female patient was 'murdered' in the asylum, this event is referred to in the Asylum's Annual Report³⁸ and in the report by the Commissioner in Lunacy.³⁹ The Annual Report of 1909 reads:

A female patient, who suffered from acute maniacal excitement, died from the effects of asphyxia caused by her having impacted her neck in the ventilating space of a shutter in a single room. This unfortunate occurrence formed the subject of an enquiry, with the result that it was found to be purely accidental.⁴⁰

As regards her complaint that inmates were made to work long hours, asylum regulations stated that the working periods were from 10 am to 12.50 pm and from 3 pm to 4.50 pm.⁴¹ However these regulations dated from 1873 and more contemporary records have not survived. It seems improbable that the hours would have been greatly extended by Coutts's time; on the other hand we do not know if the hours given in the regulations accurately reflected what happened in practice.

DISCUSSION

Mary Coutts's *Britain's Siberia* is an interesting document which raises questions as to how it should be interpreted.

Should it be seen as the record of a terrible injustice, as a case of wrongful confinement? Was Mary Coutts a fearless feminist, whose writing should be seen, as she herself implies, in the context of the rights of women? Did she unveil a conspiracy, stretching from the Aberdeen Asylum to the heart of British Government? Or is her pamphlet merely the outpourings of a mentally disturbed and increasingly paranoid woman? Does even her own account betray her as a self-important, rather grandiose individual, who repeatedly misread the behaviour of others as being of sinister design?

In fact, many of these interpretations apply to Mary Coutts and are not, necessarily, mutually exclusive. Her pamphlet can be seen in the tradition of writings by ex-asylum inmates, and the title, *Britain's Siberia*, may have been influenced by Louisa Lowe's *The Bastilles of England*. Many of Coutts's criticisms of the asylum are echoed by others. Her complaints about the lack of specific treatment, the brutality of the attendants, the lack of classification, the noise and the prison-like nature of institutional living have commonly been voiced by other patients.⁴² Her account of what she saw as her wrongful confinement also follows the tradition of the genre.⁴³ Thus she claimed that she was perfectly sane and that the certification procedures were flawed. She described her epistolary campaign to obtain her release, a campaign which involved writing to Scotland Yard and the Home Secretary.

Of course, the secondary literature on the subject has long demonstrated that it is simplistic to treat the views of mentally ill patients either as the voice of the oppressed or, alternatively, as nonsensical and meaningless babble. While much of what patients have written about the asylum has been influenced by their mental condition, much has also been a penetrating and insightful account of institutional life. In the case of Coutts, she can be seen as making some perfectly valid points about the shortcomings of the asylum system, but it is also apparent that her perspective was highly coloured by her own campaigning agenda and by her generally persecuted view of the world.

There is about her writing something of the unreliable narrator. Thus her account of her dealings with others suggests that, rather than being the injured party, she was herself somewhat prickly and overbearing. Her observations about her 'therapeutic' interventions with fellow inmates indicate that she entertained a high opinion of her abilities. Her remark that she sent an MP 'twelve documents and a long and clear statement' suggests a rather fanatical and obsessional attitude to her plight, as well as a capacity to bore.

In Coutts's case, there is also another perspective to the narrative in the shape of the asylum record. Again, it is not a matter of necessarily privileging either the patient or the official version of events; rather, it is a matter of interpreting them in tandem. The recording physicians

certainly saw Coutts as an irritating and interfering troublemaker. In *Asylums*,⁴⁴ Goffman suggested that staff preferred patients to be passive and subservient, and that they regarded the very act of complaint as evidence of mental illness. Coutts's potentially legitimate protests may have been dismissed as further signs of insanity and paranoia. However, the asylum case notes do document her increasingly persecuted view of the world, especially at the time of her second admission, and it can be difficult to maintain that Mary Coutts was a perfectly sane citizen who had been wrongfully confined.

Coutts's account can be compared with that of Christian Watt, who was an inmate of the Aberdeen Royal Asylum between 1877 and 1923. In *The Christian Watt Papers*,⁴⁵ Watt gave a positive account of the Aberdeen institution. She praised the staff and evidently enjoyed the life of the asylum. An impoverished fisherwoman from Fraserburgh, Watt was of a different social class than Coutts, who lived in more affluent circumstances in Aberdeen. Watt seems to have viewed the asylum as a haven from her harsh existence at home and was grateful to be there. In contrast, Coutts clearly resented her incarceration and her asylum doctor recorded that she seemed despondent about her status as an inmate of a mental institution. It is significant that Coutts refused to do any work in the asylum, unlike Watt, who participated readily. However, Watt was writing her account when she was a long-stay patient and after she had been an inmate for several decades. She had adapted to the system and perhaps she needed to convince herself that spending half her adult life in an asylum had not been a waste of time. In contrast, Coutts's account was written in the immediate aftermath of her first admission and after she had been liberated. Her purpose in writing was clearly different from that of Watt: Coutts wanted to show that her stay in the asylum *had* been a waste of time. It should be pointed out, however, that even Watt found the Aberdeen institution unappealing when she was first admitted, and, in her memoirs, describes her shock at the noise and disorder of the place. It was only later in her stay that she came to regard it in a positive light.

There are further contrasts between the two women. Watt had strong religious beliefs, which saw resignation to suffering as Christian obedience to the Divine Will, whereas Coutts felt God had chosen her to right the wrongs of the world. She also identified with social reformers and thought it was her role to change the system rather than endure it. Finally, Watt was said to suffer from 'mania', while Coutts was described as a 'delusional case'. Their respective mental conditions undoubtedly influenced their views of the Aberdeen Asylum.

CONCLUSION

Mary Coutts's *Britain's Siberia* adds to the comparatively scant literature on the experience of life in the Scottish asylum. It provides an impassioned, if highly partisan,

account of compulsory detention in the Aberdeen Royal Asylum. The exercise of juxtaposing *Britain's Siberia* with the asylum records demonstrates the conflict between the medical and the inmate's narrative, but it also underlines the importance of attending to *both* the patient and the clinical perspective in order to gain a more balanced picture of the asylum world.

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