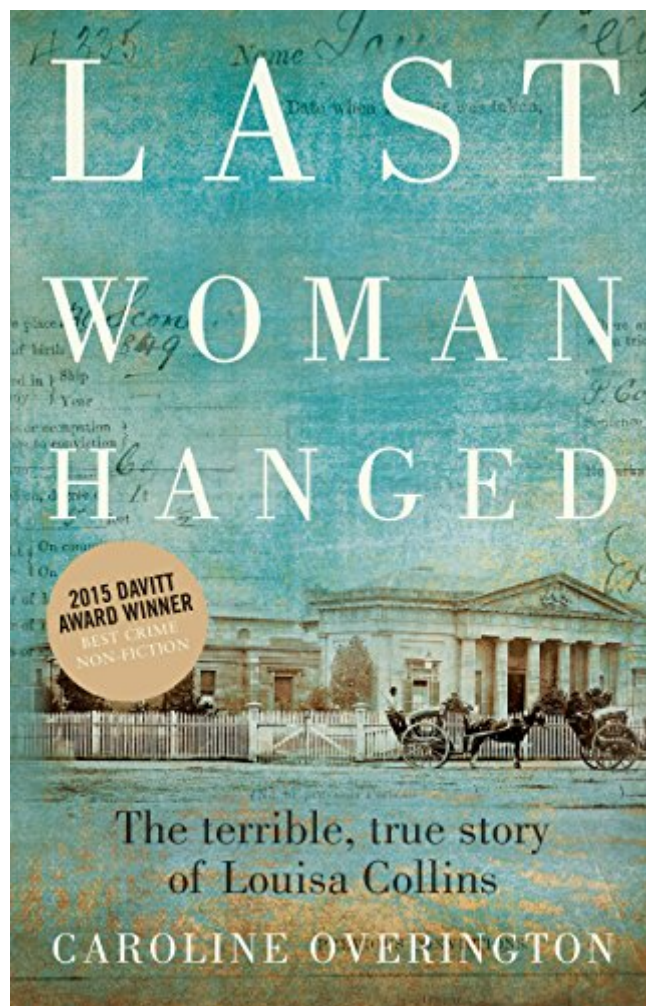


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Last Woman Hanged



Synopsis

Two husbands, four trials and one bloody execution: Winner of the 2015 Davitt Award for Best Crime Book (Non-fiction) - the terrible true story of Louisa Collins. In January 1889, Louisa Collins, a 41-year-old mother of ten children, became the first woman hanged at Darlinghurst Gaol and the last woman hanged in New South Wales. Both of Louisa's husbands had died suddenly and the Crown, convinced that Louisa poisoned them with arsenic, put her on trial an extraordinary four times in order to get a conviction, to the horror of many in the legal community. Louisa protested her innocence until the end. Much of the evidence against Louisa was circumstantial. Some of the most important testimony was given by her only daughter, May, who was just 10-years-old when asked to take the stand. Louisa Collins was hanged at a time when women were in no sense equal under the law - except when it came to the gallows. They could not vote or stand for parliament - or sit on juries. Against this background, a small group of women rose up to try to save Louisa's life, arguing that a legal system comprised only of men - male judges, all-male jury, male prosecutor, governor and Premier - could not with any integrity hang a woman. The tenacity of these women would not save Louisa but it would ultimately carry women from their homes all the way to Parliament House. Caroline Overington is the author of eleven books of fiction and non-fiction, including the top-selling THE ONE WHO GOT AWAY psychological crime novel. She has said: 'My hope is that LAST WOMAN HANGED will be read not only as a true crime story but as a letter of profound thanks to that generation of women who fought so hard for the rights we still enjoy today.' Praise for LAST WOMAN HANGED 'The story she tells ... is a useful challenge to any tendency to simple moral indignation' - Beverley Kingston, Sydney Morning Herald 'This is a fascinating book, a terrific read, and an excellent reminder of who tells the stories, and whose stories are forgotten' - Frances Rand, South Coast Register '... what's ... interesting is Caroline Overington's even-handed appraisal of Collins's alleged crime(s) that led her to become the last woman hanged in New South Wales in 1889' - Launceston Sunday Examiner

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Customer Reviews

I gave this four stars because this is a look into the history of not only the crime but some of the legal system of another country. It is something I was not that familiar with until I read this book. At this late date, it is impossible to make a true determination as to how Louisa's husbands died. This book shows how little real forensics were performed at that time. Since that time, methods for handling evidence, chemical analysis, technology, and medicine have made huge advances. More is known about how diseases affect the body, diagnostics have improved, and doctors have more testing methods to accurately diagnose illnesses. Also detection of poisons and their effects are better understood. Many of the reported symptoms of both Charles and Michael are common to a number of illnesses prevalent at that time. Charles Andrews' death was most likely correctly diagnosed at the time of his death. Considering the living conditions of the area in Botany, the probable condition of the drinking water, lack of proper sewage, and the unhygienic working conditions at the time, Charles was lucky to have lived as long as he did without any serious illness. Based on the information in the book, the evidence was mostly circumstantial combined with a host of speculation based on very little scientific or medical basis in fact. No testing or investigation was performed on the soil or water around the home or in the workplaces of either Charles or Michael. It was clear that both were exposed to arsenic, viruses, bacteria, and possibly a variety of other toxins in their homes and work. The routes for pathogens was not well understood at that time nor were there many regulations regarding toxic chemicals in the work place. These could not be discounted as the cause of death for either man. No mention was made of the rat poison until the trial based on statements made by minors who had obviously been coached in their testimony. The

prosecution did not produce any evidence that Louisa even purchased or borrowed rat poison. She was easily recognized in the area and no merchant or chemist testified to selling rat poison to her. No neighbors came forward stating she borrowed the poison for them. Mr Lusk did not put up much of a defense and a case could be made for an appeal based on his mishandling of the case. This shows how much a justice system can be biased against the poor who cannot afford to retain a decent lawyer and do the proper research. Unfortunately this is still the case. Most of us only have knowledge of hanging from movies where it always appears quick and efficient. This exposes the horrors of the reality that was most likely the norm. The follow up on Louisa's children was interesting. It is not often that the descendants are discussed in books on historical crimes. I also found it interesting that this case provided a tipping point for women's suffrage in Australia. The historical background on this was good. I found it a bit frightening that women were not allowed to sit on juries until 1947 in Australia. At times the book was repetitious and the style was more conversational. This led to the structure being a bit disjointed and meandering. The syntax could have been edited to flow better. In that respect, the book read a bit like a college thesis rather than journalistic prose. However, I do recommend this to anyone who likes history or true crime. My opinion is that an innocent woman was brutally hanged for a crime she did not commit. I suggest others read it and form their own opinions.

A tragic story of injustice by the Australian government against a poverty-stricken widow. Set in the 19th century on the eve of Australian statehood and the birth of the women's rights movement. Overington's attention to detail and accuracy is to be applauded.

Ms. Overington's book is an interesting read on multiple levels. As an avid history buff, I appreciated that the book presents all sides of the issue. The introduction states that the first question to answer is whether or not Louisa Collins was guilty, then reminds us of the historical context (women could not vote, participate in government, nor earn a living wage equal to what a man could earn). Throughout the book we are introduced to a parade of participants and how their actions affected Louisa's life. The author has carefully examined the historical events, quoting only when documented and backing up her statements with many footnotes. I enjoyed the Epilogue where the author details the lives of those people who were involved in Louisa's trials. It was also interesting to examine this little slice of history and see how it helped to bring change to a country and how some people began to spread that change throughout the world. Excellently written, this is a quick and enjoyable read.

This was great from start to finish. The most engaging true crime I've read. As a woman and attorney, I appreciated the author's bits of sarcasm throughout and her ability to tell the story without inserting her own political views. This is also a great example of strong women who persevered to gain for today's women the many rights and privileges we so often take for granted.

I came to the book because of the genre, but was delighted with the transition to an exploration of the history of women's suffrage in Australia. I have long appreciated the connections between the temperance movement and social justice/social service advances, and how that in turn made the need for a political base for women crystal clear. It is fascinating to see Overington make a case that much of that development in Australia found focus in a particular death penalty case. Even for a reader who knows next to nothing about Australian history, this is an enlightening glimpse into another threshold into the twentieth century.

Historically interesting. The relentless pursuing of Louisa with such disregard for legal protocol was disturbing. I didn't know women were hanged this late in history (1800s). For me, the reading bogged down about halfway through - maybe because it seemed like each trial was a variation on the last. Sad episode in history and a contribution to women's history.

Boring in that repetitiveness. Still a good history of an interesting time in Australia's turbulent early days. I liked the way the author traced the lives of those who figured so strongly in the life and tribulations of Louisa Collins. The miscarriage of justice that precipitously ended this troubled woman's life is shameful. Its wider meaning is not easily missed in the story of the fight for women's suffrage in Australia. All in all a good read for only a couple dollars.

So very disturbing and you never really get a clear idea that she deserved it. Glad the judicial system has become more fair. This is a good case study on how not to proceed in a court of law.

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