

Six Months – the mothers and babies of the Lying-in Home

“I, the undersigned, having applied to the Destitute Board for admission as an inmate of the Lying-in Home, do hereby agree...that I will remain in the Institution and under the control of the Board until such time as my child shall attain the age of at least six months, or until it is fit to be weaned”

Form of agreement between the Destitute Board and inmates of the Lying-in Home

The Destitute Asylum, run by the colonial government’s Destitute Board, was an operational care institution for nearly 70 years, between the early 1850s and 1918. It housed those who had nothing – the destitute, abandoned and infirm. While women had been giving birth in the Asylum since its founding, in 1877 a specially designed Lying-in Home was built – the building in which you now stand. Between 1880 and 1909 over 1600 babies were born here – their names, and some of their stories, can be seen in the gallery next door to this one.

These babies’ mothers, sometimes scarcely more than children themselves, signed an agreement placing themselves under the legal control of the Destitute Board, and under the practical control of the Lying-in Home matron. This agreement included compulsory residence at the Home for six months after the birth of their child. It was felt that strict supervision of mothers, specifically poor and working-class mothers, was necessary to prevent the social ‘evils’ of infanticide and baby-farming, issues of great concern in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, many women at the Lying-in Home resented this oversight of their intimate lives.

The constraint and intrusion of authority was unwelcome and uncomfortable in other ways. A woman had to expose almost every aspect of her life to the scrutiny of the Board, as her family circumstances, work ethic and sexual history were assessed upon entry to the Home, and she was required to declare the ‘putative father’ of her child. If she had other very young children with her, and many did, these children were also assessed, and processed into state care at the Industrial School, Reformatory, or into a licenced foster-home. Many mothers did not see their children again for months, if not years.

Once in the Home women were expected to care for and feed their new baby, as one might expect, but also to perform manual tasks ‘as if engaged for household service under the Masters and Servants Act of 1878’. Residents were literally and metaphorically ‘contained’, being only allowed to leave the Home with permission, and only able to receive visitors at

strictly regulated times. Great care was taken to keep the Lying-in women separated into 'classes' so that those who had 'lapsed' only once were not contaminated by those who had 'graduated in the school of vice'.

This surveillance and containment probably left a lasting impression upon the women in this institution. For some their time at the Lying-in Home was a singular event, something likely to be kept quiet and to eventually, perhaps, forget, or at least come to peace with. Others were regular visitors to the Home, as the relentless life of poor women unable to access effective contraception saw them 'fall' and then deliver here two, three, four, even five times. Many of the babies born here were no doubt cherished, others perhaps less so, but life went on. It is these lives, their context and legacy, which Simone Kennedy explores in *Six Months*.

Corinne Ball – Curator Migration Museum