



Patron Saint of Prostitutes: Josephine Butler and a Victorian Scandal

Helen Mathers

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The charismatic campaigner who fought Victorian exploitation of vulnerable women, and the state organization of prostitution

The "steel rape" of women is a scandal that is almost forgotten today. In Victorian England, police forces were granted powers to force any woman they suspected of being a "common prostitute" to undergo compulsory medical examinations. Women who refused to submit willingly, some as young as 13, could be arrested and incarcerated. The scandal was exposed by Josephine Butler, a beautiful, evangelical campaigner who did not rest until she had ended the violation and helped repeal the Act that governed it. She went on to campaign against child prostitution and the trafficking of frightened girls to government-planned brothels in India, and was instrumental in raising the age of consent from 13 to 16. She challenged taboos and conventions in order to campaign for the rights of women. Her story is compelling and unforgettable.

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