



Case #1: The Mary Ellen Wilson Files

Eric A. Shelman, M. D. Stephen Lazoritz

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As recently as 1874, no laws yet existed in this country for the protection of children. In New York of the same year, it was the widely publicized case of Mary Ellen Wilson—a nine-year-old girl who had been a prisoner in her tenement home, enduring unimaginable cruelty—that was the first to draw national and worldwide attention to both the social issue of child abuse and to the notion that children are entitled to humane treatment. American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) founder Henry Bergh and his attorney, Elbridge T. Gerry, intervened on behalf of the abused little girl. Following this case, the first child protection agency was founded: the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This examination of the child abuse case begins with a look at Mary Ellen Wilson's life and provides background on the events surrounding the case. It draws upon—and reproduces within the text—numerous primary sources. Mary Ellen's famous court testimony, queries urging Henry Bergh's ASPCA to continue work on behalf of children, articles describing the courtroom scene, pleas from Mary Ellen's family appealing for her custody and published documentation of the trial itself are all offered here for the first time. The extensive amounts of newspaper coverage, family letters, judicial orders and court transcripts presented in this work chronicle the historical case and its effects which have since provided hope for millions of abused and neglected children. The authors also wrote a novelized version of the story entitled "Out of the Darkness: The Story of Mary Ellen Wilson." (Dolphin Moon, 1999)

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