

**The Enigma Woman: The Death Sentence of
Nellie May Madison**

By Kathleen A. Cairns

(University of Nebraska Press, May 2007, 295 pages)

*Reviewed by Richard McFarlane**

A few minutes before midnight on March 24, 1934, the residents of the Stirling Arms, an apartment house in Burbank, near Los Angeles, heard five gunshots. Most residents thought the shots came from the nearby Warner Brothers movie lot where a gangster picture was being filmed. However, the shots came from Apartment 123 where one of its residents, Eric Madison, was dead. His wife, Nellie May Madison, was missing. A few days later Nellie would be arrested at a remote mountain cabin and charged with the murder. Her trial would

* Richard A. McFarlane is an attorney in private practice in Orange, California. He is also a doctoral student in history at the University of California, Riverside.

excite public attention, especially in the *Examiner* and *Herald and Express*, two papers owned by William Randolph Hearst. *The Enigma Woman: The Death Sentence of Nellie May Madison* by Kathleen A. Cairns is the true crime account of Eric Madison's murder, and Nellie May Madison's trial, conviction and death sentence for the crime. Nellie was the first woman sentenced to death in California. After her conviction, Nellie would avoid the gallows by belatedly confessing to killing Eric and claiming to be the victim of spousal abuse. Governor Frank Merriam would commute her sentence to life imprisonment. She would be paroled in 1943, and die a free woman in 1953 of a stroke and with a new name.

The Enigma Woman, which takes its title from one of the nicknames pinned on Nellie by the press because of her stoic demeanor during her trial, is a good book, but not a great book. It is little more than a biography of a young woman who came to the big city of Los Angeles from rural Montana and got into trouble. Whenever Cairns gets close to addressing the wider issues that would make *The Enigma Woman* a great book, she turns away. For example, Cairns writes that of the two hundred women incarcerated in California in 1934 "one-third of the women had been convicted of murder—half of them of first-degree murder—although none had received the death penalty" (p. 163). Why Nellie was sentenced to death, and none of the others were, the author does not fully explain. In chapter eleven, Cairns suggests that Nellie's belated confession and accusations of spousal abuse were keys to her commutation and eventual parole. Did the thirty or so other women convicted of first-degree murder in California in the 1930s confess and accuse their victims of spousal abuse in order to avoid the noose? Cairns does not explore the issue of spousal abuse—which existed, of course, even if it was not recognized by the psychological community or known by that name until the late 1970s. Cairns mentions in passing that three women were sentenced to death in California before 1940, all for killing their partners. Cairns does not provide any details of the other two, nor does she provide any conclusions or analysis to assess the questions *The Enigma Woman* raises.

Cairns poses three "intriguing" questions in the introduction to *The Enigma Woman*, "What drove Nellie to make life choices so different from those of her female contemporaries, ones that brought her, and her family such pain and tragedy? What was it about her that