

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in March 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who appear in the 1901 census for St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex and Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey.

Minnie Donovan

The story of Minnie is no less sad than other forgotten women. Her imprint on history is insignificant and her paper trail is sparse. She drifted in and out of her life with no legacy for us to pursue or family to connect with. Her sense of aloneness is the only significant trait that lends proof of her existence. This story has elevated her silence to a barely audible whisper, and at last now can finally be heard.

For me, Minnie's story began at the age of 30 in St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory in London. Hers was one name amongst a list of many others working as a laundress in the Census of 1901ⁱ. Marital status shows she was single and her place of birth was Cork, Ireland. A Reformatory is a rather

inaccurate description of the premises and Catholic laundries have recently been made newsworthy for their cruelty and abuse of ‘Fallen Women’ in their care. One can only imagine that in 1901 the conditions would probably have been much harsher and extremely gruelling for them.

So, what happened in the 30 years previously that brought Minnie to this place in her life? At a time in her life when most women would be married and settled down, Minnie’s life was spiralling out of control. Born in Cork on the west coast of Ireland around 1866, possibly to William and Mary Donovan, in what would have been a strict Roman Catholic upbringing in a little town called Douglasⁱⁱ.

I cannot find any of the family in the 1901 Ireland census nor any deaths matching their details. This would lead me to believe that the family at some point moved to England.

William, a labourer, possibly believed that he could provide a better life for his family across the sea. The reality was far from fulfilling and William found himself before the local magistrate in 1878ⁱⁱⁱ. It appears to be his first offence that we know of and the actual crime he commits is unclear, but his penalty is to be remanded in Wandsworth prison for 21 days.

Minnie is still a young child but the effects of a father imprisoned would have been traumatic for many and the next time we catch up with Minnie is at the age of 26. She has been committed to the workhouse in 1894^{iv} to a casual ward. To have this listed beside her name meant that she was homeless. She would have provided some sort of manual labour in exchange for food and

shelter. Being a young woman, this may have been a shock for her, stuck inside a shelter with so many others. It might also just have been a necessity at the time.

Clearly by this stage, Minnie had no family left with her parents probably deceased or incapable. Having to share beds and baths with strangers and sleeping with one eye open in case someone stole your shoes was a common occurrence. It is interesting to note that she discharged herself after 5 days. Other reasons listed to be discharged would be by order of the magistrate or due to death. Most commonly chosen was by their own request. Interpret that as you will. Life on the street may have been slightly more appealing for many. England in 1901 is at the turn of a new century and new political forces are bringing in Trade Unions and social reforms. One such reform is to launch a vigorous crusade against drunkenness and drunken behaviour. Further to the report of her being confined to the Inebriate Reformatory in 1901, a report in 1906 in the local newspaper indicates that Minnie (now a flower seller) has been arrested for drunkenness 7 times within the last 12 months^v. The arresting police officer Inspector Stiles was known for his public stance against drunk and disorderly conduct and the determination with which he pursued it. The severity of her behaviour is demonstrated by posting her photograph alongside a harsh physical description in the "Habitual Drunkards Register". As a result, she is remanded for 3 years in yet another reformatory, being due for release in 1909.

This is where the evidence of Minnie's life draws to a mysterious conclusion. There are 2 Minnie Donovans in the 1911 census which match her details. One is a domestic servant living in Lancashire in a pretty little town called St-Anne-

by-the-Sea (later known as Lytham St Annes)^{vi}. I like to think Minnie lived out her days here walking on the beach or taking a tram ride into the nearby town of Blackpool. Maybe she traded her boozing life for a fresh start away from the dirt and grime of London? A place where her past wouldn't define her.

The alternative is distressing as our other Minnie is an inmate in The Convent of the Good Shephard, which is also a Refuge for Penitent Women, Arno's Court in Brislington, Bristol. This Minnie rarely sees sunshine due to the punishing daily workload expected of her. She is now a veteran of the workhouse and prison system, mentally and physically toughened by years of living on the streets.

I am confronted by the fact that both ladies are single, not just merely unmarried and childless but without family to care for them. Their lives were like many other names listed in the Inebriate Reformatory...a list of Forgotten Women.

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Sources:

i 1901 Census (www.ancestry.com)

ii National Archives of Ireland 1866 Birth Certificate

iii UK Prison Records 1770 – 1951 (www.ancestry.com)

iv London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records 1764-1921

v West London Observer Friday 2nd March 1906

vi 1911 Census (www.ancestry.com)