

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.

Ellen Quinlan's Story

'What did you say? Seven days? Why, I shall sleep that little lot away'

During the Victorian era, attitudes towards alcohol consumption were complex and varied, the era was characterised by a strong emphasis on morality, temperance, and social order, with a prevailing belief in the importance of self-control and sobriety. For women especially excessive drinking was generally seen as morally wrong and socially unacceptable and the temperance movement, which advocated for the reduction or elimination of alcohol consumption, gained momentum during this time. Women themselves, particularly middle-class women, played a significant role in the temperance movement, as they were concerned about the negative effects of alcohol on families and society.

Female inebriate reformatories were institutions established specially for the treatment and rehabilitation of women suffering from alcohol addiction or intoxication and therefore seen as morally fallen or a threat to family stability. These reformatories aimed to address the perceived problem of female drunkenness and provide a space for 'treatment'. Often controlled or run by religious organisations or charitable institutions, the remedies varied but frequently included a combination of moral instruction, religious guidance, education, and work therapy. In addition to addressing the immediate issue of alcohol addiction, reformatories often focused on improving women's domestic skills by providing vocational training. The overall idea being to provide a structured and disciplined environment that would help women overcome their addiction and reintegrate into society as sober and

productive individuals, however, not always as successful as those who advocated for the system would have hoped, as many of the women who were incarcerated time and time again proved.

It was in just such a reformatory that in 1901, namely St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory in Ashford, 46-year-old flower seller Ellen Quinlan [written as Quinsan] was enumerated.¹ Ellen turned out to be quite difficult to trace as she had a number of aliases, including Nellie Quinlan, Ellen or Nellie Corfield and Ellen McCarthy, there were also a number of family members with similar names, just to confuse the research even further.² A portrait and description of Ellen can be found in the Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes on Ancestry,³ according to the descriptions under her various pseudonyms, Ellen's height varied between 4 feet 8 inches to 5 foot 3 inches, but whichever is true, she was obviously not a tall woman, her age was consistent however, which gave a year of birth as 1860/61. Her birthplace in the 1901 census is said to be Soho, London, but there were still several candidates in the birth indexes, so my research turned to the newspapers to see if I could narrow down any information. There are a number of Ellen Quinlan's that were accused of various misdemeanours, but most were too old to be 'my' Ellen. In attempting to try and reconcile the various aliases I came across a marriage in 1877 of a Patrick Quinlan to an Ellen McCarthy, which may be who I was looking for.⁴

The first possible mention is in February of 1880, when an Ellen Quinlan aged 29 of Ann Street, Pentonville, together with various other people, was charged at Clerkenwell court with housebreaking and jewel robbery. All the prisoners were remanded for a week.⁵ In May of the same year the Islington Gazette reports that 29-year-old flower seller Ellen Quinlan, again of 29 Ann Street, Pentonville, *who 'has been many times at this court on charges of felony and disorderly conduct, was charged with being drunk, disorderly, and making use of obscene language'*. A police officer was taking a lost child to the police station when Ellen claimed the child to be hers, knowing this not to be the case the police officer told her to go away, upon which she used objectional language and when taken into custody became violent. In court she had no defence and if she had, it would have not been of any use for the magistrate would take the word of *'the copper'* before hers. Ordered to pay a fine or a default of seven days in prison she replied *'What did you say? Seven days? Why, I shall sleep that little lot away'*.⁶

There are quite a lot of newspaper reports of a married woman called Ellen Quinlan being found drunk and having small children with her as well as women with similar names

¹ 1901 England Census, St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex RG13 1171 folios 12-13

² Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes, 1834-1934, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³ UK, Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes, 1834-1934, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

⁴ GRO Marriage Indexes, June Quarter 1877, St Giles District, Vol 1b, page 836

⁵ Globe, Tuesday 3 February 1880, page 6.

⁶ Islington Gazette, Monday 23 May 1880, page 2

appearing in workhouse records but again, I could not be sure that they are the correct Ellen. However, a newspaper report of June 1899 is the right Ellen, the 45-year-old, who the report stated, had been repeatedly before the court for drunkenness, was dealt with under the Habitual Inebriates Act and sent to St Joseph's Inebriates' Reformatory for three years.⁷ Which is verified by her presence in St Joseph's as recorded in the 1901 census return.

According to the entry in the 1906 Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes, Ellen McCarthy, alias Nellie Quinlan was committed by Clerkenwell court to a certified inebriate reformatory for three years. Seven years later in September 1913, Ellen or Nellie Quinlan is further committed to a certified inebriate reformatory for yet another three years.⁸ There are no newspaper reports that mention these sentences.

Frustratingly the numerous mentions of an Ellen Quinlan in census, police and criminal records, along with the umpteen newspaper reports, in any of her many guises cannot definitively be said to be this particular Ellen.

To conclude, it is important to note that the approach to alcohol addiction in Victorian times was influenced by the prevailing moral and societal norms of the day. Currently, our understanding of addiction and treatment has evolved significantly, and approaches to rehabilitation have become medically oriented and focused on individualised care.

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⁷ Islington Gazette, Wednesday 14 June 1899, page 2

⁸ UK, Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes, 1834-1934, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk