

# *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.*

## **Mary McManus from The St. Joseph's Reformatory**

The nineteenth century was a time of burgeoning charitable giving on the part of the middle and upper classes, occasioned by the deprivation, as a consequence of rising urbanization, industrialization and inequality of wealth; after all the 1834 report on the Poor Law had stated that there was a duty to promote the religious and moral education of the labouring classes. This was not universally acknowledged to be a good thing as M.P. Davies Giddy said in 1807, "It would teach them (the labouring classes) to despise their lot in life. It would render them factious and refractory." Also implying that there would be too large a financial burden. Indeed there were so many charities that in 1869 The Charity Organization Society was founded to

coordinate them, there being over 200 alone in London. The charities sort to either improve the lot or improve the conditions of the working classes and poor. Where charitable donations and “care” were needed middle class women found an outlet to stealthily extend their influence outside their normal confined remit, the men of course were in control of the legislation to improve the lot of the poor.

This all sounds wonderfully altruistic and in many cases it was but for many, as long as the giving and philanthropy were recognized, enhancing personal reputation and social standing, and no personal contact was actually required or involved, so as George Bernard Shaw stated “A millionaire does not really care whether his money does good or not, provided he finds his conscience eased and his social status improved by giving it away.” Movements covering all aspects of working class life were formed from improvements to working conditions, education, workhouses, health provision and many more.

There was however not only a divide between the poor working classes and the more affluent, but in the eyes of “respectable” society a divide within the poor, the deserving poor, those whose situation arose through no fault of their own; a woman with a young family whose husband had died for example, but there were the “undeserving” poor, those whose situation arose from their own shortcomings and inadequacy. A woman whose husband had been put into prison and she left with

a young family was classed as “undeserving” and so were those who occupied much of the time of the courts, the inebriates.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that they were deemed the “undeserving” poor, various authorities and organizations considered that if the inebriates were removed for a suitable length of time from society and access to their addiction; much of which was adulterated, some of the beer being laced with strychnine to give bitterness, saving on hops, and cocculus indicus, which made the beverage more intoxicating, the inebriate would recover from the substance obsession and society would not be troubled with their “nuisance” and expense. Not only were these individuals regarded as “undeserving” but they frequently fell into another category, the “not respectable”. Many people, without education, recognized what Davies Giddy had feared education would inspire, that they despised their hopeless lot in life and turned to drink to escape from it.

By the middle of the century the growing problem of the alcoholic, their effect on society, morality and family life, leading, as some believed to the degradation of the nation, was being recognized as movements such as The Temperance movement developed. The increase in drunkenness was attributed by some to the very reforms which had been taking place, shorter working hours and higher wages. Control of these “deviant” members of society and particularly the bad behaviour of the female inebriates should be put into practice.

Some privately run “homes”, funded by subscription and donations were set up such as St. James’ Kennington Park. Funds being generated from newspaper advertisements and a magazine “Rescue the Perishing”. However there was a scandal and a court case highlighting abuses such as over crowding, lack of privacy by taking off bedroom doors, and slavery as income was also generated by a laundry and the women worked exceptionally long hours, the owners getting away with this ill treatment as the “homes” were not covered by the factory acts. There was physical abuse. This did not aid the cause of those wishing to solve the problem of drunkenness within the society and to endeavour to introduce a state sponsored system.

By 1898 General Regulations for the Management and Discipline of Certified Inebriate Reformatories were set up. They required the inmates to be treated patiently and listen to grievances while at the same time being firm, a difficult tightrope. In all there were only 2 state funded reformatories, one at Warwick, for men, and the other at Aylesbury for women. Both came under the remit of the prison commissioners. These 2 institutions were a last resort and some magistrates were reluctant to send offenders to them as they were actually not prisons and to forcibly send people to be incarcerated some regarded as against their civil liberties (an unusual attitude at this time).

The Habitual Drunkards Act of 1879 followed by the 1898 Inebriates Act enabled state and certified reformatories to be set up by local authorities. Here habitual drunkards, who were clogging up the courts by frequent indictments for drunk and disorderly and associated offences, costing the local authorities money, could be confined for up to three years as opposed to the revolving door of drunk and disorderly, foul language or assault, arrested, fined or committed to prison for very short periods and drunk again. "These reforms would be administered by local authorities and financed by a number of bodies, central government, local authorities and charitable donations". Some local authorities had a form of subscription system, whereby those whose officers were not keen to spend local finances on establishing a "home", which after all was not a proven remedy, they paid regular sums and if they sent offenders to the home there would be an amount per offender. Despite the overall desire was for the offenders to have their undesirable influence removed from society and to put an end to the many costly court cases, our subject here, Mary McManus was said by one magistrate to have cost Preston over £50 in a very short period. Not many local authorities took up the baton of the experiment to provide the members of their locality with reform and rehabilitation.

By taking the offenders away from the temptations of their deprived environment for a long period of time it was hoped that their attitudes and behaviour would change. The regimes were to provide a stable routine of hard work, supplemented by a nutritious, simple diet along side regular religious contemplation.

The idea was sensible on paper but many of the unfortunates who were sent to the “homes” – there only being 14 in all as compared with the numerous asylums eventually established– were already untreatable and were passed on to the last resort, Aylesbury, only to be discharged and a return to to their old ways. Having so few “homes” established meant that the experiment was not fully developed and in consequently was short lived only lasting until the beginning of the First world War, when it was remarked that, because many men had been sent to the front and women were needed to fill their shoes, “once descent and regular employment was made available the “unemployables” were impossible to find”

The fact that there were so few institutions meant that demand outstripped supply, consequently overcrowding and dedicated staffing became an issue with despite the best of intentions, abuses and lack of organization crept in. The beneficial effects which would have resulted from a well organized system failed to materialized and Mary McManus’ case was to illustrate some of the failings of the system.

Fairly short at 4’ 10 ½”, of fair complexion with blue eyes and brown hair by 1898, turning grey, Mary McManus was born in Preston, Lancashire in 1859 to Irish parents, James and Catherine McManus (formerly Catherine McGurty). She had six siblings. Sadly her mother died sometime between 1861 and 1871 and at age 11 she was housekeeper to her father and elder brother. By 1881 Mary had 2 children named after her mother and sister, Margaret born in 1879 and Catherine in February 1881. The area

she was living in appears to have been a poor one with all the houses having cellars which were occupied by families living as boarders. By the time of the census Mary had just completed a 3 month prison sentence for larceny which she was sentenced for on January 19<sup>th</sup>. From these dates daughter, Catherine would have been born in prison. Was she able to take toddler Margaret with her? Perhaps it was the poor environment which caused the probable death of baby, Catherine. Three years later Mary had been fighting and received a month's gaol term. Was this where she received the scar to her right eye?

She appears in the Habitual Criminal Registers on Ancestry where her list of offences under her own name, includes an appearance at Preston Petty Sessions on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1881 where she received 2 calendar months with hard labour for stealing a watch. In 1895 in Blackburn she was sentenced to 7 days for stealing a quilt. In 1896, using the alias, Mary Gent, she again was incarcerated for 2 months for burglary. A year later she stole 1 boot and received one month. Other names she used were Mary Jent and Mary Brown.

By 1900 the magistrate listed that Mary had appeared 97 times before the court and that she had spent most of her time in prison. It was recorded that when she was not intoxicated she was a descent, respectable woman and a good worker. Mary begged to be sent to an inebriates' home and attempts were made to grant this wish. Eventually a place was found for her and the clerk of the court explained the conditions to her.

Clerk: You understand it is not a prison

Chairman: No it is not a prison. It is a Certified Inebriates' Home - a Roman Catholic Home. At this home you will not be punished: it is a reformatory home. You will be sent to the home for a period of 3 years. It is no use us committing you to prison for the short periods that we have done ... It seems to be a hopeless case for us to deal with ... You will have the opportunity of being let out on licence if you behave yourself and your term of confinement being shortened. You will be under strict supervision. When you leave the home, if you behave yourself well you will not be forgotten and the magistrates will take some interest in your welfare.

Mary cried as she was sentenced.

The strict rules for release from the homes had been laid down in a letter by The Home Secretary. The home was to inform the relevant police authority and the courts of the release. A suitable place and "guardian" for the person released, was to be found, who had to sign a declaration that they would supervise the person and report any lapses of behaviour to the authorities.

Whether Mary fell through the net, St. Joseph's was over stretched and understaffed, just lax or the system was not supervised efficiently we do not know but on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1901 the first thing that the authorities in Preston knew of Mary's release from St Joseph's was that she again appeared in court on charges



of drunk and disorderly. However, this was not the end of the matter as the magistrates were very annoyed at the breaches of the rules. Perhaps because the chief inspector, Mr Walmsley and his wife were also officials of the local Temperance Society. Calls were made for homes to be established locally to stop the reliance on homes at a distance.

To hasten her release Mary had reportedly written to her sister, in Preston, to act as a guarantor. However, her sister had either not agreed or Mary had deviously written to Alice Smalley, the wife of a lodging house keeper in a low and inappropriate area for an inebriate and where most of her offences had previously occurred. I have been unable to find evidence that Alice and Mary were siblings. Alice had signed a document to agree to report to St Joseph's should Mary relapse. This she had not done. Once in court Alice Smalley was called to give evidence and warned that she could also face charges for the failings in her duty.

Mary's case not only sparked condemnation by the courts but added to the campaign by the Lancashire Daily Post reported on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1901 against the lack of diligence by local officials not doing their jobs.

“If this case be a sample of the way in which this particular inebriates' home is managed; or all the inebriates homes are managed then it is clear that the ratepayer's money is being expended in vain”

Lancashire was not the only authority that found St. Joseph's wanting. In The East Anglian Daily Times for 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 1901 it was reported "St. Joseph's at Ashford receives patients for a weekly payment but of course the total accommodation is quite inadequate for the criminal drunkards of the whole country. Until more general means are provided for the establishment of certified homes, the Act must continue to remain more or less ineffective"

The authorities endeavoured to return Mary to the home, then she was sent to Aylesbury and even attempts were made to find her places in other homes but all ended in failure. Her court appearances continued after 1911 when there does not appear to have been any entries for her. Unfortunately there were many Mary Mcmanuses and a death for our Mary could not be verified. Perhaps she was one of the unfortunates found dead without identification.

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