

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.

Agnes Eliza McGovern's Story

In 1901 Agnes Eliza McGovern was a pupil at the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery, located at The Grange in Street, Somerset. The aim of the school was to educate girls with the skills needed to become proficient in housewifery or domestic service which is explained in the Minute Book by this statement:

"...to make the girls who pass through the school better fitted to be the wives of artisans or others of a similar class, or to be good domestic servants"ⁱ

What was the background of girls who became pupils of this school? Were they the daughters of artisans or were they young inmates from the local workhouse? We shall explore the circumstances of one, Agnes Eliza McGovern, who was a pupil in 1901 when she was thirteen years old.

Agnes Eliza was born on 21 June 1887 and baptised on 17 July 1887 at North Wootton, Somerset, her father, Bethel McGovern, recorded at that time as a soldier.ⁱⁱ

Her parents Bethel McGovern and Emma nee Batt had married on 17 November 1886 at Warwick Gardens Methodist Chapel, Kensington & Chelsea.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the decennial census of 1891 Agnes was living with her maternal grandparents, William and Mahala Batt, in the village of Dulcote, Somerset.^{iv} So where were her parents? In fact, her mother Emma was living less than a mile away in Dinder, Somerset, and working as a servant in the household of a barrister and JP for Somerset, Arthur Fownes Somerville, resident at Dinder House.^v



Dinder House, Somerset

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This picture of Dinder House indicates Emma was working in a prestigious household at this time. It seems possible, even probable, that she encouraged her daughter Agnes to train at the School of Cookery and Housewifery so that she might follow in her footsteps and fill a similar role in another prestigious household.

Agnes's father was not to be found in the census of 1891. The reason for his absence was explained by the divorce proceedings instigated by Emma in 1892 on the grounds that Bethel McGovern had deserted her and entered into a bigamous marriage in the USA. A divorce was a very rare event in England in the nineteenth century and was usually only available to the upper classes due

to the enormous costs involved. However, Emma obtained a decree nisi in August 1893 through a “pauper cause” divorce which ‘was paid for out of a fund set aside, often by churches, for very poor people whose property was valued at less than £25.’ It is very likely that Emma received legal advice from her employer, Arthur Fownes Somerville, JP, which enabled her to sue for divorce under this somewhat obscure legal rule.^{vi}

As already noted, the census of 1901 found Agnes Eliza a pupil at the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery, and ten years later in 1911 she was employed as a domestic servant in the household of an Anglican clergyman, Charles Berners Penrice, a widower, with an unmarried daughter, at his home in Bournemouth.^{vii} A successful outcome for Agnes Eliza and for the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery.

No longer a domestic servant, in 1921 Agnes was living with her mother, Emma and step-father, William Humphries. At this time Agnes was described as a laundress working on her own account, from the home of Emma and William Humphries at Newton House, Bedminster, Bristol, which included the offspring of their marriage: two daughters Marjorie and Lilian aged 23 and 18 respectively and a son, Sydney aged 14, plus a niece aged 10 and a boarder aged 34, a seemingly crowded household.^{viii} However, just over a year later on 29 July 1922, Agnes, at the age of thirty-four, married Alfred Edward Charles Griffin at the church of St Aldhelm in Bedminster, Bristol.^{ix} A daughter was born to Agnes and Alfred, Beryl Maureen, on 18 July 1924, their only child. Alfred Griffin was listed as a chocolate moulding machinist on the 1939 Register, which recorded the population just prior to the beginning of WW2, Fry’s chocolate factory being a major employer in Bristol at that time when the

family were living at 1 Ripon Road, St Anne's Park, Bristol. Agnes was engaged in domestic duties (the usual description for married women without paid employment) and Beryl at the age of twenty-four was a tobacco stemmer; WD & HO Wills, cigarette and cigar manufacturers, being another major employer in Bristol.^x

Alfred Edward Charles Griffin died on 2 June 1945 at Fry's bowling green, Somerdale, Keynsham, Somerset, leaving £534 1s 3d to his widow, Agnes Eliza.^{xi}

Agnes was still resident at 1 Ripon Road, St Anne's, Bristol, when she died at the age of ninety in 1978.^{xii}



A recent image of St Anne's Wood, in close proximity to Ripon Road, where Agnes lived for more than forty years.

Looking back on Agnes's early life, the information and advice accessed by her mother, Emma McGovern, during her employment at Dinder House, provided both Emma and Agnes with opportunities inaccessible to the majority of those

in their social station; a divorce for Emma and for Agnes an opportunity to acquire a formal training at the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery. The advent of the Great War in 1914 provided new employment opportunities for women and Agnes was one of many thousands of women reluctant to return to domestic service when the war ended. She was never described as 'servant' on any official documents post-1918, and even in 1921 when her occupation was recorded as 'laundress' she was working 'on her own account', and therefore self-employed.

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Sources

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- ⁱⁱⁱ London, England, Non-conformist Registers 1694-1931) Accessed via Ancestry 28/12/2023
- ^{iv} Somerset St Cuthbert Out Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891; Class: RG12; Piece: 1913; Folio: 94; Page: 6; GSU roll: 6097023 Accessed via Ancestry 30/12/2023
- ^v Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891; Class: RG12; Piece: 1914; Folio: 123; Page: 5; GSU roll: 6097024 Accessed via Ancestry 30/12/2023
- ^{vi} Petition Date 1892 – 15031-15040 – Divorce Court File No.15033: McGovern Spouse Patrick Bethel McGovern Divorce date Decree Nisi 1 Feb 1893 Final Decree 7 Aug 1893 Accessed via Ancestry 28/12/2023
- ^{vii} Census Returns of England and Wales, 1911 RG14_05868_0619_03.jpg Accessed via Ancestry 29/12/2023
- ^{viii} National Archives RG15/11696/205 RD319 RS3 ED28 Accessed via Ancestry 31/12/2023
- ^{ix} Bristol Archives; Bristol, England; Bristol Church of England Parish Registers; Reference: P/St.ald/R/2/C Accessed via Ancestry 31/12/2023
- ^x The National Archives; Kew, London, England; 1939 Register; Reference: RG 101/5000b Accessed via Ancestry 01/01/2024
- ^{xi} England & Wales National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations) Accessed via Ancestry 01/01/2024
- ^{xii} Bristol Archives; Bristol, England; Bristol Church of England Parish Registers; Reference: P.St AnB/R/3/1 Accessed via Ancestry 01/01/2024