

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



This story was written, in January 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of girls from Leeds, Girls' Industrial School, Yorkshire.

Louisa, Agnes, Jane and Catherine McDermott

We meet the McDermott sisters in the pages of the admissions' registers for the industrial school in Edgar Lane, Leeds. The first of the sisters to be admitted, on 13 May 1868, were Agnes, aged nine and Jane, aged seven. The register merely gives their names, ages and dates of admission, together with the fact that they were born in Leeds. The following year, on 23 July 1869, they were joined by their older sister, Louisa and her record reveals much more about the family's circumstances, as well as Louisa herself.

Louisa was thirteen, with brown hair, blue eyes, a freckled face and light complexion. She was described as being stout and well built. She had never been to school, which was not compulsory at this time and could not read, write or cipher. She had been employed in the local flax mill. Her mother was dead and

her father, Henry, was a labourer on parish relief. Other family members mentioned in the register are an uncle and aunt, Edward and Ann McDermott, who were 'hawkers of nuts' and like Louisa's family, lived at Riley Court. Another uncle and aunt, Bernard and May (or Mary) were also nut hawkers; they lived in Off Street. There was also an aunt and uncle, William and Elizabeth O'Brien living in Sheffield.

Louisa had been picked up destitute, neglected and begging. She appeared before the magistrates and was committed to the industrial school for three years. Regarding her previous character, the comment reads, 'she has had the care of younger sisters, all sent out to beg'. It was 10 November 1869 before Catherine, the youngest sister, joined them in the industrial school; she was six years old. Catherine had attended the ragged school but was unable to read, write or cipher. By this time, their father was selling oysters in beer houses and the family was now in a lodging house in Off Street. Catherine was committed to the school for nine years because she was destitute, neglected, homeless and had been taken out to beg by her aunt.

Tracing the sisters' lives prior to their being admitted to the industrial school reveals that they were the children of Henry and Mary Ann McDermott née O'Brien. Their father had been born in Ireland and their mother in the East Indies. They had an older sister, Mary Ann, born in 1852 and an older brother, Bernard, born in 1854. In October 1868, their sister, Mary Ann, appeared before the Quarter Sessions courts. A subsequent incident, in 1876, was to see Mary Ann described as 'a woman of bad character', a phrase often used to describe a prostitute; she had assaulted a police officer. Bernard too was in and out of court

from the age of fourteen. Their oldest sister, Elizabeth had died in infancy in 1849.

In 1861, Henry was working as a hawker and the family were living at 6 Off Street, which they shared with the Cunningham family; the sisters' O'Brien grandparents lived next door. Despite the admissions' register stating that Louisa had never been to school, she was listed as a scholar. Her sister, Mary Ann, was also a scholar, yet Bernard, who fell between them in age, was not.

On 27 December 1865 their mother, Mary Ann, died of typhus at 163 York Street, Leeds. Her husband, Henry, was described as a fruit dealer. Typhus fever is normally transmitted through the bites of body lice and is prevalent when hygiene is poor. It is surprising that no other family members succumbed. By November 1869, the four sisters were all in the industrial school. In 1871, all girls, including the McDermotts, were transferred from the premises in Edgar Lane, which, from then on, was to cater for boys only. Louisa, Agnes and Catherine can be found in the nearby Windsor Street Girls' Ragged School in the 1871 census. There is no sign of Jane, whose birth was registered with the middle name Frances. It seems likely that she had died, although no corresponding death registration or burial has been found.

Catherine, the youngest sister, died of tuberculosis at the age of ten; she was still living at the school. The death certificate gives her father's name as James but this appears to be an error. She was buried at Beckett Street, non-conformist cemetery; the family were Catholic. Interestingly, a Kate or Catherine McDermott of roughly the right age, has a future, cohabiting with a James Ralph and bearing him three children. This Katherine was in trouble with the law on

several occasions and the Habitual Criminals' Registers states that she used the aliases Jane McDermott and Jane Mack. It is just possible that this is actually Jane McDermott, assuming her dead sister's name but a more likely scenario is that this is the girls' cousin, another Kate, or Katherine, McDermott.

In October 1874, the *Sheffield Independent* reported that two girls, Agnes McDermott and Alice Greenaway, had absconded from the Howard Hill Reformatory in Sheffield. For this, Agnes was to serve a sentence of five weeks with hard labour in the House of Correction. Is this the same Agnes? Howard Hill was specifically set up for Catholic girls, so it is plausible that Agnes might have been transferred there. An Agnes McDermott appeared before the Yorkshire Quarter Sessions courts in 1876; again there is no certainty that this is her.

Although Agnes cannot be found in the 1881 census, it seems that she remained in, or returned to, Leeds. According to a report in the *Bradford Weekly Telegraph*, in June 1884, Agnes was assaulted by her aunt, Mary. This would be Mary, the husband of Bernard McDermott senior, Henry's brother. Mary had grabbed Agnes by the hair and struck her on the top of the head with a carving knife, 'inflicting a severe wound three inches in length'. Agnes 'lost such a quantity of blood that she was unable to walk about for a fortnight.' The name and address of the aunt make it clear that this is definitely our Agnes but there are no confirmed sightings of her after this. Online family trees seem convinced that Agnes died in 1930 but this death relates to an eight year old child.

Louisa's story is the most complete. In 1877, she married William Henry Murrell, a widowered hawker who was ten years her senior. In 1881 they were living at

1 Naylor's Court, Leeds. Louisa took on a step-daughter when she married and also had four children of her own. The eldest, Walter, was born in 1877.

It seems that Louisa's relationship with William may have been inconsistent. In June 1879, together with William Parker, Louisa Murrell alias McDermott, was charged with breaking into a pawnbroker's and stealing a quantity of watches, jewellery and plate. The report in the *Leeds Mercury* stated that Louisa 'had been previously convicted and she was living with Parker, who was a known associate of thieves, as his wife'. In October the same year, Louisa was again in court, this time for stealing a purse and six shillings from William Swales at Pontefract. Her associate on this occasion was a James Kendrew; they were acquitted. Had this offence taken place earlier but only just come to trial? Despite the record being annotated 'acquitted' Louisa, said to be a hawker, was in Wakefield Prison in October 1879, perhaps she was just there awaiting trial, or was she in jail for the June offence, which seems likely to have attracted a custodial sentence.

Whilst she was in prison, Louisa's son, Harry, was baptised by the prison chaplain; had she given birth in prison? There is no way of knowing whether Harry's father was William Parker or William Murrell, or even James Kendrew.

Perhaps Parker was in prison, maybe he and Louisa had fallen out, whatever the reason, Louisa was back with her husband in 1881, living at 1 Naylor's Court, north-east Leeds. The Kendrews were living in the same court as the Murrells. It was a poor neighbourhood, with several families, including the Kendrews, living in cellars.

Louisa's daughter Fanny was born in 1882 and baptised at St. Edmunds, Leeds. Louisa's prison record had stated that Louisa was a member of the Church of England, so it seems that Catholicism had been abandoned. A second daughter, Agnes, was born in 1884 and buried in Beckett Street Cemetery in 1886.

Louisa died in 1887 and was buried in Beckett Street Cemetery, leaving three children aged between five and ten. In 1891, there is no sign of Walter or Fanny but Louisa's son Harry was in the Leeds 'Moral and Industrial Training School', so it seems as if history was repeating itself. Harry then disappears from the records but Fanny managed to break from the past, becoming a nursemaid to a lecturer in Headingley. She married James Westwood, the manager of a grocer's shop, in 1908 and had two daughters.

Janet Few January 2023

Sources used

West Yorkshire Reformatory School Records 1856-1922, originals at West Yorkshire Archives Service WRT/1/72-77, 81-84 accessible on www.ancestry.co.uk

Nominal Register for HMP Prison Wakefield, Yorkshire, originals at West Yorkshire Archives Service C118/109A accessible on www.ancestry.co.uk

Calendar of Prisoners for HMP Prison Wakefield, Yorkshire, originals at West Yorkshire Archives Service C118/259 accessible on www.ancestry.co.uk

Baptism registers for All Saints, Wakefield, Yorkshire, accessible on www.ancestry.com

Baptism registers for St. Edmund's, Leeds, Yorkshire, accessible on www.ancestry.com

Burial registers for Beckett Street non-conformist cemetery Ref LC/CEM (B)/1/8 and 1/9 accessible on www.ancestry.com

1851 census for 12 Lloyds Arms Yard, Leeds, Yorkshire HO107 folio 521

1861 census for 6 Off Street, Leeds, Yorkshire RG9 3380 folio 91

1871 census for the Girls' Ragged School, Windsor Street, Leeds, Yorkshire RG10 4555 folios 114 and 155

1871 census for 10 Stainburn Court, Leeds, Yorkshire RG10 4555 folio 134

1881 census for Pounders Court, Leeds, Yorkshire RG11 4518 folio 11

1891 census for 1 Middle Row, Leeds, Yorkshire RG12 3683 folio 128

1901 census for 22 Back Row, Leeds, Yorkshire RG13 4215 folio 6

1901 census for 9 Cardigan Road, Headingley, Yorkshire RG13 4246 folio 93

1911 census for 40 Middle Row, Campfield, Leeds, Yorkshire RG14 26917 SN 179

Birth, marriage and death indexes of the General Registrar

Death certificate of Catherine McDermott 1873

Death certificate of Mary Ann McDermott 1865

Find a Grave www.findagrave.com

Sheffield Independent 2 October 1874 p 4 col e

Bradford Weekly Telegraph 28 June 1884 p 7 col b

Leeds Mercury 12 June 1879 p 5 col d