

WOMEN IN HISTORY

Letterkenny

"Today I am fourteen. Quite grown-up! Girls of sixteen are getting married. By now, they say, I should know what path my life is taking. I tell no-one, but I still believe my life will be spent caring for the sick."

Agnes Jones, Journal 1846

"We decided therefore that the most practical thing to do would be to revive the old cottage industries and to develop and improve the ancient art of spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing and embroidery."

Alice Hart, An Account of the work of the Donegal Industrial Fund 1887



Staff of Letterkenny General Hospital in 1960
Courtesy Johnny Mc Collum



Eileen Harkin, Bebe Keys, Pearl Briscoe, Cassie Harkin and Ruby Bates. Courtesy Johnny Mc Collum

Famous Women in Donegal's History

- **Agnes Jones** (1832 -1886), was born in Fahan and became one of Florence Nightingale's first trained nurses working in a Liverpool Workhouse.
- **Jane Austen's nieces** – May, Lou and Cass made Donegal their home and are buried here.
- **Eithne Coyle** (1897-1985) was an Irish Republican Activist born in Falcarragh. She went on hunger strike in Ballyshannon jail in 1922 and was president of Cumann na mBan 1926-1941.
- **Margaret Dobbs** (1873-1961) was involved with the Irish language school at Gortahork.
- **Finola MacDonald** (c.1500 - ?), also known as Iníon Dubh which means Dark Daughter, married Hugh O'Donnell in 1569 and used her military power and ordered several murders to ensure her eldest son Hugh Roe O'Donnell became King of Tirconnell in 1593.
- **Alice Hart** (1850 - ?) set up the Donegal Industrial Fund in 1883 which promoted Donegal tweed and encouraged a revival in cottage industries.



Women's Camogie Team, Donegal County Archives.



Woman beside her caravan,
Eugene McCusker



Annie Gallagher

Ordinary Women in History

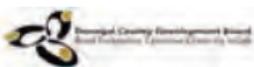
The history of ordinary women's lives in Donegal can be discovered in postcards, newspapers, census returns and archives. Talking with older women about their and their families' life stories and looking at their family photographs can reveal women's history.

The 1901 Census for Letterkenny shows the names and occupations of Letterkenny women at the time including:

- Margaret Doherty, a baker
- Ellen Sweeney, a machinist
- Jane Catherwood, a photographer
- Katie McDevitte a publican and running a hotel
- Annie Boyle, a general domestic servant
- Ann Duffy, a retired nurse
- Ellen Sweeney, a machinist in a shirt factory
- Georgina Douglas with a private income.



Bicycles E Kelly



WOMEN OF THE WORKHOUSE



'A Terrible Place' Hannah Herrity

The Letterkenny Workhouse and Fever Hospital first opened on 14th March 1845. The names of women who came into the Workhouse were written down in Registers. They came to the Workhouse because they were sick, homeless, poor and hungry. Some women had jobs in the Workhouse.

Who came into the Workhouse?

Three women who came to the Workhouse in 1913 were:

- **Margaret Harper** 74 widow Housekeeper
- **Hannah McDevitt** 70 married Servant
- **Maggie Bradley** 28 married Dealer



What happened when women misbehaved?

Lizzy Carithers was accused of, 'using abusive language to the Matron, persisting in doing so after being cautioned', in the 1880's and was made to spend 3 hours in a separate room by the Master. When children were naughty at the Workhouse School, the School Mistress beat them 'with a rod on the hands'.

What did women who lived in the Workhouse eat?

Healthy women who lived as inmates in the Workhouse above the age of 15 in 1887 were given this to eat:

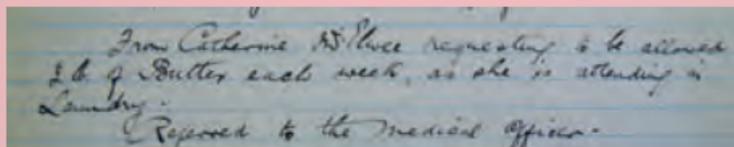
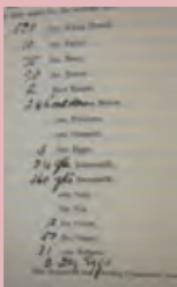
Breakfast: 6 ½ oz meal
(2/3 Indian meal,
1/3 Oats)
½ pint Buttermilk

Dinner: 8 oz wheatmeal bread,
1 pint soup (5oz oatmeal,
3oz Barley and 12oz peas to
1 gallon seasoned with onions,
pepper and salt)
OR Potatoes and Buttermilk

Supper:
5 ½ oz meal
½ pint buttermilk

(1lb = 454 grams, 1oz = 28 grams)

One woman called Catherine McElwee asked for ½ lb of butter each week as she worked in the laundry.



Board of Guardians Letterkenny Poor Law Union Minute book 31 May 1901 – November 1901

<< A shopping list for Workhouse food August 30 1901

What jobs did women do in the Workhouse?

The inmates washed and repaired clothes.

The Matron was in charge of the women in the Workhouse.



The Schoolmistress taught children in the Workhouse School

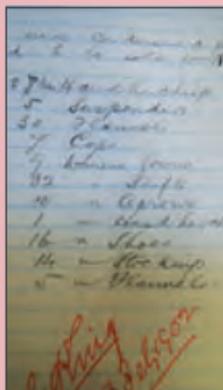
The Midwife delivered babies.

What did the women wear?

The inmates wore uniforms with caps and aprons.



Dunfanaghy Workhouse Displays



List of women's clothes in the Archives

Did people die in the Workhouse?

On December 21st 1920 Martha White died of 'Cardiac Disease' aged 70. Margery McGuire died on March 19 1921 from 'Tuberculosis' aged 15. Mary Ward died of 'Senile Decay' aged 87 on February 15th 1921.

MAY McCLINTOCK

-ONE WOMAN'S STORY

Growing up on the farm

"I was born in 1931, near Convoy. My mother Mary Jane, Mini, was an outdoor worker, thinning turnips and flax on her hands and knees. My aunt did the milking, churning, butter making and washing."

"She was a lovely woman my grandmother – Rebecca Woods. I heard she used to make shirts for the factory in Ballybofey. She tied the cradle to the foot of the sewing machine and rocked the cradle and sewed at the same time."

"Now, the barn was done up for the workers that came in the summertime to pull the flax. They were mostly from the Gaeltacht – Irish speakers. There was this room, I remember seeing into it once – the beds and all. After lunch, my grandmother put two big pots of porridge on the hearth, one of maize meal and the other of oatmeal. The workers just came in, reached for a bowl and a spoon and filled whatever porridge they wanted."



Schooldays

"I went to school in Lifford in '44, The Prior School. I was about 13. I got the train from Convoy station. Eddy McIntyre was the assistant librarian and he produced all these books and told me what to read. I got my Leaving. I was an 'open competitor' and got into the teacher training college in Kildare Street, Dublin in 1950."



Raymochy School, Manorcunningham

School Teaching

"I was teaching at Portlean National School, near Kilmacrennan. There was only me in those days and about 16 or 17 children. I went on the bicycle everyday from Kilmacrennan. Much later, in 1982, I taught in Raymochy School in Manorcunningham for 14 years."

Marriage, Family and the Vet Surgery

"Then I got married in 1956; you weren't allowed to teach any more – the marriage ban was on. I had four children. My husband was a vet. I was very busy with taking calls, talking with farmers at the door, people coming in with sick sheep, a lot of book keeping."

Politics, Tidy Towns and An Taisce



Urban District Council Meeting with May in attendance

"I was an Urban Councillor, Chairman one year. I got very involved in Tidy Towns. During my time there we set hundreds of trees in Letterkenny. With An Taisce, we started the Green Schools. I was involved with the IFA (Irish Farmers Association); the farmers still meet here in this house."



Butterfly Garden, Letterkenny set up by An Taisce

NORA MCCONNELL (NEE BOYCE)

NO ORDINARY HOUSEWIFE

Nora Mc Connell (1924-1993) grew up in No. 10, the High Road, Letterkenny. A mother of twelve children, she was known as a person who did much more than was expected of a housewife and mother during that era. Through her endless hours of baking, flower arranging, catering and voluntary work she left an impression on the town that lasts to this day. Nora's daughter Mary, and her lifelong best friend, Eilish Sweeney, who still remember her with fondness, kindly provided their memories and thoughts about Nora for this exhibition.

She was one of the founding members of both the Flower Club and the ICA in Letterkenny. She would arrange flowers for churches, weddings and community organisations, and she was one of the most active members. She could dress a single flower in a vase and make it look like a lot of work had gone into it. The Flower Club erected a plaque in her honour on the Main Street in recognition of her work.

She was such a talented baker. She never weighed anything, she just used her hands. She could bake anything, and at Christmas she would make a lot of cakes and post them off to family and friends here and abroad.

She was very creative with crafts; she could do anything with her hands. Stuffed toys, quilt making, basket weaving, hearth rugs, Christmas decorations and cushion making to name a few. In terms of imagination, she was way ahead of her time. "No" was not a word in her vocabulary, and she would teach anyone who wanted to learn. She was that sort of person. Any friend that she had, she kept for life.

She would volunteer at the Folk Festival and do a lot of catering for all the folk groups. She loved the buzz and the people who came from abroad. All the women from the ICA would help decorate the parade floats on the High Road, and Nora would provide the food. They would all gather and have a great time.



Nora with Mary Robinson when she visited the Charity bookshop on the Main Street



Nora Mc Connell and Eilish Sweeney with participants in the Letterkenny Folk Festival

"She was a woman with a big heart and people who knew her still speak of her kindness and generosity. She was one of the jewels of Letterkenny."



ICA Dinner Dance: Back L-R: Lily Sweeney, Mrs. Mc Menamin, Nora Mc Carron, Lily Mc Laughlin, Katie O Callaghan, Mary Crossan, Mrs. Doherty, Nora Mc Connell, Kathleen Haughey, Mrs. Johnston Front: Sheila Mc Alinney, Gracie Coyle, Annie Mc Kendrick, Eilish Sweeney, Mary Anne Mc Kendrick, Mary Ellen Mc Manus, Susie Coyle



Nora and her son, Christopher



Mrs. O Callaghan, Nora Mc Connell, Lily Mc Laughlin, Mary Anne Mc Kendrick and Susie Coyle