

Memories & Dreams

A Biography of
Nurse Mary Kirkpatrick

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Nurse Mary Kirkpatrick, 1862–1943, with Casement baby, c.1905–1908, AMN807, Macleay River Historical Society, Angus McNeil Collection/Australian Picture Library.

Irish Dreams

She spoke about her home in Ireland. I was intrigued. I said I wish I could go there and Nurse said, 'Oh no Kitty... we would not sit here like this in Ireland with the doors and windows open. We had to shut ourselves in, draw the blinds, because you could be shot in your own home. So you are lucky to live in Australia.'

[Kathleen 'Kitty' Laney].¹

*K*itty's memories are of her childhood and of visiting Mary Kirkpatrick as she aged. It is significant that she would recall such powerful words spoken by my great grandmother about the conflict in Ireland. This one story my great grandmother would return to, and friends and family would continue to remember it, telling it over and over again, keeping it safely in family lore. Nonetheless, despite this deeply held social and political memory Mary Kirkpatrick was to live most of her life in Australia, more than sixty years, and her allegiances did finally shift to this new coast, these new surrounds, new work and new friends. Her Irish origins were important to her of course; and her childhood, her growing up and her marriage in Belfast created important aspects of the person, the character she was to become. But it was a childhood she did not talk about, those moments now lost to history, and to the family.

Sadly for the chronicler of family stories, children rarely record and write their own histories. And when as adults we reflect on those childish years we recall the tiny pieces of that past imperfectly. We filter our memories of childhood through a prism of mostly ambiguous notions about family and human relationships. We are cautious, nostalgic; we select memories that are compelling to ourselves, fitting our images of the present to those faintly-held versions of the past. Mary Kirkpatrick neither talked about her childhood nor did she leave any documents or mementos that might tell a biographer something more about her life. Therefore, the childhood I have constructed for Mary is filtered through other stories, other half-remembered lives and the remnants of almost forgotten people and places. Careful research of the place of her birth added some of the colour, restored some of the long-forgotten details of her family life and hopefully provides a picture of her childhood, and family life in Northern Ireland.

Born 2nd November, 1862 in working class Bridge End, Ballymacarrett, near the docks in East Belfast, Mary Magee was the eldest daughter of George Magee² and Sarah Black. Of Scottish and Irish origin, the Magee name can be spelt Magee, MacGee, MacKee, M'Gee, MacGhee and MacGhie. One of the most common names in Ulster, the spelling of the name as Magee is found mostly in counties Antrim, Down and Armagh. The Gaelic form of Magee is said to be Mag Aoidh, 'son of Hugh'. No records survive to tell me exactly how the child

I have searched both the parish and civil registers since but have found no other recorded births. Not all births, death or marriages were recorded once civil registration was instituted in Ireland from 1858 as it was not compulsory, although it was generally customary and officially encouraged.

When George Magee married he was a ropemaker probably working in one of the rope factories in Smithfield not far from where he and Sarah lived. When George's father Nicholas Magee died in 1893, he was recorded as living in Mount Pottinger Road, East Belfast. I have no records detailing his mother's name or parentage. Women's names were not surprisingly left off certificates and omitted from other documents. Working as a shoemaker at the time of his son George's marriage, Nicholas is described as a dealer upon his death. When Mary married, the certificate notes that her father George was a poulterer and perhaps no longer at the ropeworks. The occupations of flesher (butcher), poulterer, dealer, van driver—these pepper the columns listing the rank or profession of men in the Kirkpatrick and Magee families. Poorly educated, untrained and unable to earn high wages, these men struggled to support large families and they did whatever work they could get.



Blackstaff Linen Mill c.1908 Belfast, Ulster Museum Collection, Belfast.

Sarah Black is described as a factory worker on her marriage certificate and also on the birth certificates of her children. Sarah of course was still working in the factory when Mary



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