**Sent Away for Disobedience: Young Women in the Stirling District Asylum**

*Layla Essat, Masters student in Gender Studies at the University of Stirling.*

Although patients as young as 12 are recorded, in the years 1900 to 1910, those under eighteen formed the smallest class of patients found in Stirling District Asylum. However, it is not their underage appearance in itself that is a worry, but whether they should ever have been institutionalised at all.

There are distinctive similarities between many, if not all the young women under 18 I read about during this period. They had all been extremely bright at school; winning academic awards, prizes for excellence and even securing school scholarships. In the years previous to their admittance, relatives described them as amiable, loving and well behaved. However, around the age of 14 they all remark upon changes in their daughters.

Minnie Finnie Murray was admitted to the Asylum on 4th August 1906 at the age of 16. It is recorded that around a year previous to her admission she had begun to withdraw, was not speaking as much as she used to, refused to do housework and had become stubborn and disobedient. In the case of dressmaker Mary Harning, we encounter a similar story. Transferred from Fife District Asylum, her casenotes describe her as being unsettled and with no inclination to work. Interestingly, in the casenotes brought with her, she herself, wonders whether it was this disinclination to work that had prompted her family to send her away. A third case study, of Margaret Darling reveals a similar backstory. Also admitted at the age of 16, she had been working as a domestic. It is said that in the past few years she had become “peevish” and “fretful” and was now restless and troublesome.

The diagnoses made for these girls ranged from “apathetic dementia”, to “mental deterioration” and “simple melancholia”. What was similar was that these conditions were all attributed to having “pubescent or adolescent origin”. It was the process of growing up that was to blame.

To understand this scenario better, I place these young women within the context of others in the asylum. Unlike many patients, upon admission they were in relatively good physical health, and ate and slept well. Unlike their older counterparts, there are no accounts of violence towards staff or other patients. However, early casenote entries remark on their continued insularity and avoidance of work. These young individuals do not seem to fit the pattern of behaviour seen others in their position. Here we have young, intelligent and academically successful girls who have all recently entered the working world but have recently begun to act out. At this point I began to question and speculate an alternative story for these girls.

What struck me odd about the asylum system was the incoherence between diagnosis and treatment regime. Doctors seemed obsessed with naming the cause of ill health, but administered very little medical treatment. “Treatment” appeared more about the management of people than helping them and took the form of ice baths, sleeping draughts and sedatives. “Therapy” consisted of contribution to the running of the asylum through domestic work such as cooking, cleaning and working in the laundry. Furthermore, a patient’s amenability to work was cited as indicative of their recovery.
It must be noted that of the patients I discuss here, several were released as “recovered” within unusually short periods of time, thus indicating the lack of real mental illness. However, what angers me the most about this situation is that a proportion found themselves moved between several asylums, were never released and became trapped in the system. In the cases mentioned above, these young women died. Unlike in other cases though, their deaths were not resultant of their diagnoses but of physical weakness and disease.

Overall, I posit that the asylum, like many other institutions, acted as an agency of social control. In the case of these young women, they were refusing to behave in accordance with social expectation and had now become too much for those around them to cope with. Their refusal to conform and adhere to predetermined expectations lead to them being labelled as insane, and sent away until such time as they could prove they were able to re-join society. In essence, and rather cynically, in these cases the job of the asylum was to discipline those exhibiting deviant behaviour, correct disobedience before releasing them as once more acceptably productive members of society.

Layla Essat is a Masters student in Gender Studies at the University of Stirling. Layla is undertaking her project placement investigating the Stirling District Asylum archive held by the University of Stirling. In relation to this she will be giving a talk entitled “Women in the Asylum: Explorations of Injustice”, on 10th May, in Pathfoot Building, D1, 4-5pm. An exhibition exploring the records of the archive “Staring at the Ceiling Looking at the Stars” is currently on display in the Art Collection in the Pathfoot Building. For further information www.artcol.stir.ac.uk