

7. Pride and Perception in Pollokshields

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The present day perception of a 'house sitter' is one who cares for a property in the absence of its owners. Before policing was anything special, sitters were commonplace to the walled, well-kept suburban properties of Glasgow. It was best to keep the riff raff out, especially in such a select garden suburb as old Pollokshields.

Pollokshields had a veritable army to run each little personal estate, and with its pretty gardens, gardeners especially found ready employment. Their duty was keeping up appearances, which applied not only to the vegetable patch but their own behaviour. The owners of West Lodge, Maxwell Drive, had three garden workers, including a William McKeown. A thirty year old Irishman from Fermanagh, he had spent the years 1882-1893 about some important Scottish gardens including that of the Duke of Montrose. Even with the pride and prejudice of the period McKeown, with his winning Irish ways, made himself popular with the local girls and his employers. His estate pedigree was very good. They trusted him enough to make him caretaker for the West Lodge, just prior to its sale in 1892.

McKeown lived in a bothy in the grounds of the house attached to the main stables. He worked the wall garden to satisfaction, his were cabbages the best locally. He courted a girl in Kinning Park and went drinking with a friend Thomas McNeilly. McKeown looked after the house and looked after himself, keen on keeping up appearances he was a dandy amongst the local garden folk.

On 10th October 1892, happy that as the cat was away, the mice could play, McKeown let his hair down and went drinking with Thomas McNeilly. They had a right old night on the town and at one point were drinking whisky galore and pints of beer in Finnieston Street. They went on a pub crawl that seems to have taken them along Broomielaw and across the Southside. Somewhere enroute the pair met up with a local girl named Eliza Connor. Connor was wearing a black cashmere dress, a blue serge petticoat and a green shawl, a typical street girl, she nevertheless attracted McKeown's attention. His further attention soon revealed a flannelette vest embroidered with worsted mauve, and a second aged petticoat with blue and yellow stripes, little else. At the end of their drinking session McNeilly who was by then very drunk was helped into a cab, McKeown climbed in with him and got the girl Connor to follow in a second cab. The two men arrived at West Lodge first, the young woman, as if a genteel visitor, a few minutes later. All three spent the night in the house. McKeown and Connor slept together, McNeilly was simply too drunk. Perhaps the girl was impressed by the Irishman's fine 'home'

On the 11th of October Alexander MacDougall, who also gardened at West Lodge, arrived early. As usual, he knocked McKeown up, meaning to prepare breakfast for him as he always did. McKeown was not in a good mood, nursing a hangover and the paranoia of 'what do you want, what have I been up to'. All this was about 6 a.m. and when MacDougall had been chased, McKeown suddenly realised his situation, that MacDougall might tell on him. He began a hurried cleaning up, which included the young woman. McKeown woke Connor, told her to leave, then realised her existence compromised his job security, particularly as it turned out that she was a prostitute. Entertaining women indeed, and this wasn't helped when McKeown spotted Connor helping herself to his watch

McKeown and Connor had an acrimonious squabble and panicking, things took a much more serious turn. McKeown lashed out, hit her and cut her throat. He then had a body on his hands. In sheer panic, and somewhat surprisingly and gruesomely, he took time to cut her to pieces and began to bury her around the property. He then took to his heels out of the garden gate and vanished into the undergrowth of the old industrial yards immediate to Pollokshields.

MacDougall returned to the house at about 09.00 and found McKeown missing. Still willing to make him his breakfast, he hunted through the house and when he came to McKeown's bedroom, he got the shock of his life. The room was in turmoil and women's clothing scattered and bloodied lay everywhere. Connor had fought for her life. MacDougall hurried off for help and he and another local gardener went to the signal box at Maxwell Park and there had the signalman call to town for the police. Superintendent Muir and other police then came to the house during the morning. The police response was remarkably slow, even for the time, but the house was not lacking in evidence.

The search was easy, the blood traces led from the bedroom into the coach house yard, where lay a deep pool of blood. A bloody trail led onto the garden where three blood stained coal baskets sat. The police then saw four neat mounds about the rose bed and prodded them to see what they contained. One yielded legs, another a disembowelled torso, the actual bowels, then a woman's head and her arms. The butchery shocked them all, but they knew the likely culprit.

McKeown had first made his way towards Bellahouston, where he had been spotted by two local women who knew him. This scared him and he turned south, being spotted sometime later about Giffnock quarries. He took a few minutes rest in a quarry cart and started out again westward for the Ayrshire coast ports. He hurried on towards Paisley and came north to Halfway.

Two game keepers walking across East Henderson Farm challenged him on sight. McKeown began running and fled into cover near to Halfway House, with the keepers in pursuit. There he scribbled a note pleading mercy for his soul and slashed at his own throat. The game keepers running up found him bleeding and he was given first aid. A pinafore from a passing girl was torn up to make bandages and compress to stay the bleeding. McKeown was carried on a gate, providing makeshift stretcher, out to the road and carted off under arrest in an ambulance wagon. He was treated in hospital for his injuries from which he recovered.

Back at the West Lodge, the police was at a loss what to do with the dismembered body, and then decided to use the old coal baskets to porter the body to the Southern Police Office. Cabbage leaves ripped up from the vegetable patch gave some privacy to the contents of the baskets. It was obvious to all that mutilation had been post mortem and indeed the girl's face was unmarked. But they still were not sure who she was.

Sometime was then spent in the house looking at evidence, a kitchen knife, bloodied with hairs was taken. A joiner's handsaw was also found and this had dried clotted blood and remains adhering to it. Fleshy materials and blood spots were all over the bothy floor though all evidence pointed to the body's dissection in the coach yard.

It was first thought that McKeown had killed his Kinning Park girl friend, but she soon turned up alive and kicking. The victim's clothes were displayed at Govanhill and over the next day or so Connor was identified at 161 Stockwell Street and that she was a well known street girl.

In the court evidence it was stated that it was sufficient for her to have been killed, and that McKeown be shown clemency for being led astray by a class that was a disgrace to the Glasgow streets. Connor, it was argued, regularly robbed her clients but this was not an excuse for a horrid and brutal crime sparked off by a drunken squabble. Actually, McKeown probably killed her to save face. That was the real tragedy of this very nasty crime from a period when people were obsessed with keeping up appearances.

McKeown went to the gallows, which he deserved, hanged as much for his desecration of the body as the actual killing. At the last, a pathetic creature, he died much as Connor had, from massive trauma to the larynx and neck. This was not so much from the rope, for as it ran tight it split open the barely healed wound where McKeown had tried to cut his own throat.

What does this crime reveal? Principally that in the class ridden society of the time a prostitute's life was of little importance. Murder might actually be risked to avoid social embarrassment in the community. So has anything changed? No not really, people with no position to keep up, still do stupid things to maintain position. But what is so interesting is that in the general history of suburban Paisley and Glasgow, this and many local incidents, have been brushed to the side for a haute bourgeois history of convenience and keeping up appearances against the social ordinariness of industrial city life.

McKeown's escape route was also of interest, making use of farming and estate communication lines across an area 'policed' by game keepers, not ordinary country police. McKeown made every use of ditches and hedgerows, yet he was quickly caught and though the police response was initially very slow, the community hue and cry was immediate and effective.

But what really was McKeown's crime? Basically he had offended the trust placed in him as a house sitter. It is dangerous to play when the cat's away. On McKeown's death an old Irish woman was heard comment that 'the devil had got hold of him now'. However offending social mores was the greatest of crime.

Source material

The above was derived from a long term project studying the manufacture of violence in the west of Scotland, using newspapers, police reports and history sources as clues to prejudice and perception in parochial law and order.

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