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years ago

Gertrude Parker: a life in an asylum

Joy Parker



Gertrude Eline Parker was a long-term patient in Glenside Hospital, Bristol.

She was born in January 1898 in the village of Stoke-Sub-Hamdon in Somerset. In 1905, the family moved to a pleasant three-storey house in Bristol, where Gertrude grew up. She was artistically gifted: she painted and played the piano. In 1920, Gertrude married Edward Parker, a railway foreman on Avonmouth station. She was 22 and he 45. Initially, they lived in a disused army hut but they soon moved to Sea Mills, Bristol. Their first child, Raymond, was born in 1922. He was a sickly child and they did not know whether he would live, suspecting he might have tuberculosis. In 1924, Edward and Gertrude had a second son, Reginald.

It was at this point, when she had two young children, one of them critically ill in the children's hospital and the other only 11 months old, that Gertrude was first admitted to Bristol Lunatic Asylum, later known as Glenside Hospital. The admission record stated that she was suffering from chronic mania, caused by childbirth and prolonged stress. She was 27 years old.

Her case notes from this time record her behaviour as 'very restless, dishevelled and uncontrolled'. She was said to be '[talking] antics and [asking] conundrums . . . Often kneeling in a praying attitude and [saying] "I have blasphemed against the Holy Ghost".'

Perhaps her condition improved, because in 1928 she was discharged to Ashley Grange Care Home, Shirehampton. But after 6 years she returned to Glenside, where she spent the rest of her life.

While Gertrude was in Glenside, her husband visited her every other Sunday until his death in 1945. However, there is no record of her mother ever visiting, perhaps because of the social stigma attached to mental illness.

Gertrude's elder son Raymond, despite his ill health, lived to be a grown man. He married and adopted two children. Her younger son Reginald became a missionary in India, where he married an American, also a missionary. They spent 20 years in India and had five children. Reginald was not allowed to visit his mother until he was 16 years old, an experience he later described: 'When I visited my mother at the age of 16 she could not recognise me – whether she later had any understanding I do not know. Even though my grandmother and my aunt sought to "mother" me, I have never thought of anyone else as my mother. I look forward to meeting her in a more radiant form in another world.'

Gertrude Parker died in October 1969. On her death certificate the cause of death is recorded as 'bronchopneumonia and chronic schizophrenia'.

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