

Daniel Connors and the Murder of Ellen Moriarty

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A tragic story of homelessness, alcohol and injustice, Longford Tasmania, 1867



Old Longford Prison, TAHO

The grisly discovery of the partially disembowelled body of Ellen Moriarty was made in the early morning of the 16th of December 1867 near the Longford race course by Edward Murnane who was on his way to work. The largely circumstantial evidence that was heard at the coroner's inquest saw Daniel Connors charged with the murder - a charge he vehemently denied until his last breath.

Daniel was from County Kerry, Ireland, and aged 19 when transported for stealing £3 15s. from the person of Mrs Keefe in 1849. He had previously been convicted for a similar offence for which he received three months' imprisonment. After serving three years of his seven year sentence for the most recent crime, he, along with 323 other Irish convicts, boarded the ship Lord Dalhousie in Cork, and arrived in Tasmania on the 14th of August 1852.¹

By Irish standards, Daniel's conduct record was reasonably busy, with offences consisting of insolence, misconduct, neglect of duty, making a false statement against his overseer, drunk, being in possession of bread and £4 under suspicious circumstances, and absconding.¹ In 1856 he received his Certificate of Freedom, but by 1861 was facing charges of stealing money and burglary from two separate premises. On the first he was acquitted, but the second he was sentenced to four years imprisonment.² His second conduct record was similarly busy with another

offence of absconding, several for misconduct, disobeying orders, assaulting a constable, and wilful destruction of government property.³

Upon release, it would seem that Daniel was one of the group of ex-convicts that found it difficult to settle down, instead travelling the countryside, obtaining work, food and shelter where ever he could, and drinking the proceeds of any employment as quickly as it was earned. Toward the close of 1867 Daniel had three days' work for a Mr Thompson cutting wood and thrashing a cereal crop and was then headed for Cressy. Along the way he called at the public house at the Nile where most of the men were engaged in organised fighting - "the taproom was full of blood, and slime, and spit." After partaking in six rounds with a man, selling his boots for 4s., and buying a loaf of bread and a half gallon of ale, he then headed for Evandale. Here he called on an old acquaintance, Mrs Hickey, they smoked together, and he bought breakfast for three men who had no money.⁴

Before he could get to Longford, he had to wait with several other men at the bridge as the river had flooded, and they shared the food one of their number had. Eventually Daniel made it to Longford and went to Watson's public house and then Clarke's Railway Hotel where he shared the ale he bought with those that wanted it.⁴ Of

those that partook in his generosity were Mary Ann Robinson, who "threw herself" in Daniel's lap⁵, Ann McDonnell and Ellen Moriarty, all whom had been drinking for a good part of the day. Robinson had earlier sold the dress she was wearing and McDonnell her sunbonnet, in order to "treat" Moriarty.⁴

None of the women were strangers to a tittle and had all spent time in the Longford lockup. Ellen Moriarty (nee Vickers) had grown up in the Soho district of London and had no less than four appearances at the Old Bailey before being transported in 1843 per Margaret, aged 26, for stealing 21lbs. 10oz. of bacon.⁶ She was a married woman, although had been separated from her husband for 18 months, and had two children at the time of transportation.⁷ In 1849 she married John Griffiths in Campbell Town⁸, but at some point she began to live apart from him. She later lived with John Smith at Longford but had also left him nine weeks before her murder when their landlord sent her away because of her drunken episodes.⁴

After several hours more drinking, Daniel Connors, Ann McDonnell, and Ellen Moriarty left Clarke's and the last time they were seen together was standing talking at the water closet. The next morning Ellen's body was discovered and McDonnell and Connors were arrested, with McDonnell being released soon after.

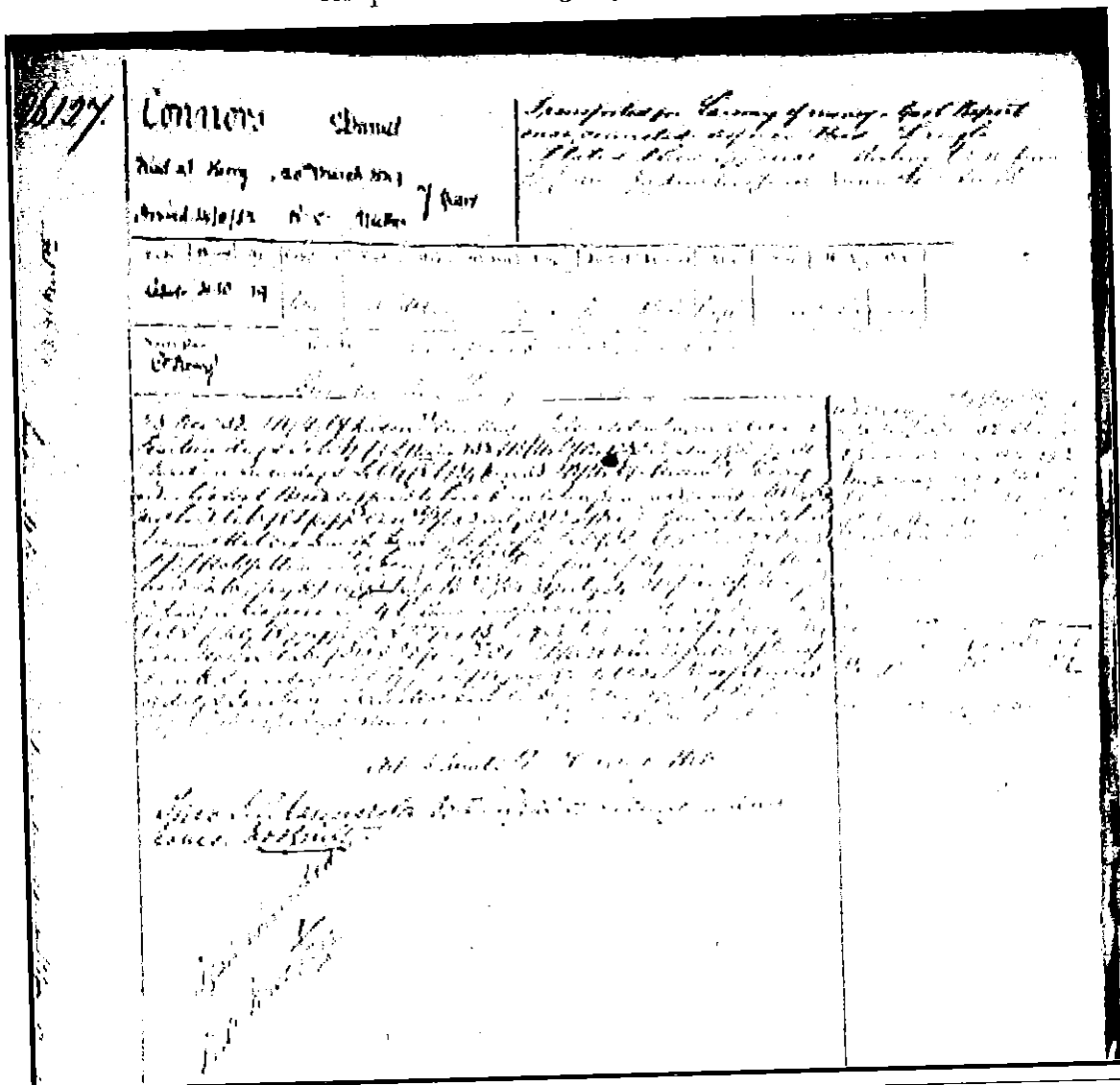
Daniel could neither read nor write or afford representation and so defended himself in court. He believed Ellen Moriarty had been murdered by someone she had crossed as she was known to have given information to the constables at Carrick.⁴ Conflicting evidence regarding whether or not Daniel was seen with a knife at the hotel cutting tobacco for one of the women hampered his cause, but the most damning evidence was the existence of blood on his clothes. His explanation for this was that it could be blood from a bullock that he had assisted cutting up when at Mr Thompson's, from fighting at the Nile, from falling into a gorse hedge, from killing a turkey and goose whilst on the tramp, and from a blow to the head he received from Mrs Wheeler because he had told her the beer she served was like soap suds. In his own evidence, Dr G. W. Turnley confirmed the blood stains on the clothes but could not say for certain it was human blood and admitted he had not tested to see if it was.^{4,5}

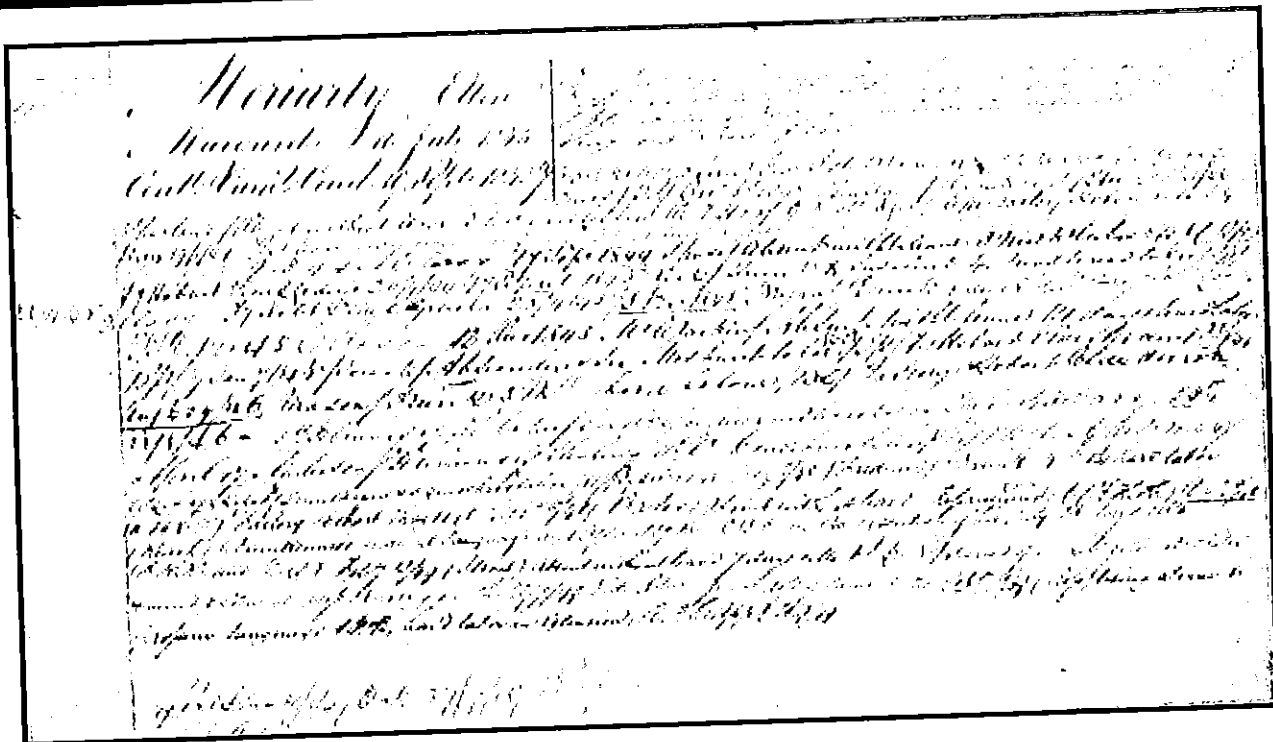
Most witnesses also contradicted Daniels account of events leading up to the murder, apart from a prisoner of the Crown who had been in the same yard as him whilst on remand, and even his account of the fighting at the Nile was questioned because of conflicting dates the fight was supposed to have happened. James Thompson confirmed the evidence of cutting up the bullock but it was all too little to assist Daniel in his plea of innocence. After the hearing of all evidence the jury retired to make their decision, and after two hours returned a verdict of guilty.⁴

A few days later Daniel Connors was sentenced to death for the wilful murder of Ellen Moriarty but not before he gave a long speech regarding his innocence, the fairness of the trial, the questionable evidence of the Crown's witnesses, and the lack of support he had received from the clergymen of the Catholic Church. He believed the Superintendent of Police, Thomas Perkins, had some of the witnesses conspire to find him guilty or face

prosecution under the Vagrant Act, and stated that if found not guilty Perkins had said he would pay for his passage out of the country.⁹

The Judge addressed Daniel's concerns as he saw them and was about to pass sentence when Daniel interrupted, "I don't want to hear any more sermons from you." His Honour - "Don't interrupt me, sir!" Daniel - "Give me my sentence and have done with it." His Honour - "I shall say what I desire. Your life is due to society as an expiation of the crime you have perpetrated. I say I hope you will pay the most earnest attention to your spiritual advisers, and obtain that mercy from above which you cannot get here. The sentence of the Court upon you, Daniel Connors is that you be taken from hence to the place from where you came, and from thence to a place of execution, and that there you be hanged by the neck until you are dead! And may the Lord have mercy on your soul." Daniel - "May you get back to England."⁹





Daniel received the news that he would be executed on the morning of Tuesday, 17th of March, and the Cornwall Chronicle reported his indifference to the news. The paper stated "the most extraordinary feature" of the case was a lack of motive, but were in no doubt of his guilt. They hoped in his time left he would confess, as a duty to society and for the sake of the witnesses, the Crown and Jury, validate their decision.¹⁰

During the next few weeks, Daniel received the attention of the Church he felt he had till then been denied, for which he was grateful. As Daniel was led to the gallows, he stepped forward to the railing and addressed the crowd of onlookers. "To the public - I have to thank the officials of the gaol, and Mr Cox, for their great kindness, and attention to me while I have been here. I am going now to die for a crime I am entirely innocent of. I never had, act, or part in it. I sincerely forgive all my prosecutors from my heart, and I hope that God will have mercy on my soul." He then moved back to the centre of the platform.¹¹

Daniel was only 4 feet 10 inches tall and when his body fell through the drop, his lack of weight caused his death not to be instantaneous. His body twitched and contorted for ten to twelve minutes before finally hanging motionless.¹¹

The final words I will leave to The Cornwall Chronicle reporter who witnessed the execution. "If all criminals who go to their final account declaring their innocence of the crimes of which they have been convicted on the clearest evidence are really innocent, then human tribunals are indeed so very fallible that the punishment of death ought to be abolished, no matter how clear the evidence of guilt may be. It requires strong proof of guilt to induce twelve men sworn to give a verdict according to the evidence brought before them, to induce them to deliver a verdict of guilty against their fellow man. There are always some amongst them disposed to recommend that the prisoner be allowed the full benefit of any doubts that may arise from defects in the evidence. It would be difficult to find any twelve men amongst whom the one half would not be disposed to act on the merciful principle, that it is better that twenty guilty men should escape than that one innocent man should suffer the penalty due only to the guilty. We believe the jury who were impanelled to try Connors are as intelligent men and as mercifully disposed as the prisoner could have selected if he had been allowed the widest latitude of selection, and as they were guided to their verdict by a large body of evidence, all tending to the

conviction of the prisoner, and not a shadow of evidence being of such a character as to leave a possibility of even straining it in his favour; they have no reason to regret their verdict. It was given in accordance with the oath administered to them, that they should "a true verdict give according to the evidence." There is but little probability that any further light will now be thrown upon the incidents connected with the horrible murder of the unfortunate woman Ellen Moriarty."¹¹

- ¹ CON33-1-109
- ² The Mercury, 04/05/1861; The Cornwall Chronicle, 29/06/1861; Launceston Examiner, 02/07/1861
- ³ CON37-1-9 image 489
- ⁴ The Cornwall Chronicle, 15/02/1868
- ⁵ The Cornwall Chronicle, 01/01/1868
- ⁶ The Proceedings of the Old Bailey website
- ⁷ CON40-1-8; CON15-1-2; CON19-1-2
- ⁸ RGD37/8 : 1849/54
- ⁹ Launceston Examiner, 18/02/1868
- ¹⁰ The Cornwall Chronicle, 07/03/1868
- ¹¹ The Cornwall Chronicle, 18/03/1868

