

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2221 The Price of Love

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By trawling through newspapers, I have uncovered family secrets that were buried almost one hundred years ago, and the two people at the very heart of them, James and Daniel Price, my great-great grandfather and 3rd great granduncle respectively, lived two intertwined and tragically paralleled lives.

James was born to James Flynn and Ellen Price – a couple who were never legally married, but spent their whole lives together – on the 25th of July 1898 in an industrial town in the Northwest of England named Widnes. A few months later, on the 2nd of October 1898, James' uncle Daniel Price was born.

The parallel nature of their lives begins, rather frustratingly, with their absence on the 1901 England census. Ellen Price appears on the 1901 census with her parents, Edward and Margaret, as well as all four of her siblings, with one noticeable exception – Daniel. Despite being almost three years old by this time and a completely legitimate son of a couple in their 40s, he is nowhere to be found. James Price's absence can perhaps be more easily explained – by 1901, Ellen Price and James Flynn have had a second child, John, who is also missing from the census. Ellen and James were living a few streets away from each other at the time, and they both list themselves as 'single,' rather than 'married' – it's important to remember that in 1901, census forms were not filled out by the head of the household, but rather by an enumerator who travelled round to each house collecting data. Being an unmarried couple living apart from each other, it seems likely that James and Ellen's sons were purposely left off the census in order to hide the scandal from the enumerator. The answer to Daniel Price's absence, however, may simply be lost to time.

In 1911 James and Daniel were living together in a 5-room house which they shared with seven other people – James' younger brother John, five of Daniel's older siblings, and their mother Margaret. During the First World War, they moved to a house a few streets away, but stayed together. James and Daniel lived together, attended school together, and grew up together. In December 1919, Daniel married Sarah Jane Barnwell; she lived just a few streets away. They moved in together shortly after their marriage, and Daniel was separated from his nephew for the first time in his life - however, this was far from the end of their parallel lives.

Daniel and Sarah would go on to have a number of children. In early 1920 – just a few months after they were wed, they welcomed their first child, John, who was closely followed by Monica in 1921, then Elizabeth in 1922. Sadly, 1923 seems to be the beginning of the end for Daniel. On the 29th of November, he is called up to court and fined £2 for assaulting a railway employee.^[1] He and Sarah have another child, Jean, in 1924, before Sarah summons him to court for desertion. She gives "evidence of general neglect,"^[2] and the magistrate orders Daniel to pay 25 shillings a week to his wife. Surprisingly, the couple have one last child, Teresa, in 1926. Later that year Daniel is summoned to court for a third time on another count of assault, this time for hitting the licensee of a pub over the eye whilst drunk, and is fined £2.^[3] At some point during the next year, Sarah leaves Daniel, moving away from Widnes and finding a new man – in March 1927, desperate to provide for his children, Daniel gets caught stealing coal and two pairs of boots. He pleads guilty, and expresses that "he had been out of work for nine months... his wife had left him,"^[4] and he "had five little children." He states that the boots were for his son, but that they were too small for him.^[5] It is unclear exactly when, but at some point during the following years, Sarah returns to Widnes and takes

on the children to raise with her new partner. In subsequent years, Daniel is charged with drunkenness a number of times, and is never able to raise his children again.

On the 28th of December 1921, at age 24, James Price married Hannah Mary Elizabeth Keough, a 19 year old from Toxteth Park. At the time of their marriage, Hannah already had a one-year-old daughter named Edith, whose father is unknown, but James happily took her on and raised her as his own. In the years that followed, they had many children together, the first of whom was Patrick James Price, my great-grandfather, in 1922, followed by Helen in 1924, and John in 1926.

In July of 1926, James was sent to prison for one month and fined 10 shillings after drunkenly assaulting the owner of a chip shop. Upon his release, he “said that he was very sorry. It was all through drink. He admitted to several previous convictions.”^[6] This case came only two months after Daniel’s second assault charge. James and Hannah had their final child in early 1929; a daughter named Mary.

Tragically, on the 24th of April 1929, Hannah died of pulmonary tuberculosis, followed closely by her newborn daughter, Mary. James’ life came crashing down around him. Just two months later, he was summoned to court for neglect of his children, and ordered to place them into the care of an institution. He was out of work, just as his uncle had been when his children were taken from him, and though he was actively searching for work, he was unable to stay at home and care for his children. The case was adjourned for three months, under the condition that the children stay in “the institution” in that time.^[7] In September, James was summoned to “the local branch of the NSPCC for neglecting his [four] children in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering and injury to health.” He pleaded relentlessly with the courts, refusing to give up custody of his children, stating “I shall not always be out of work.” Eventually however, the courts ruled against him, and he was stripped of custody. A police inspector who gave evidence stated that “the home was in a much-neglected state, the bedding dirty, and the whole place dilapidated,” and earlier in the year, he had “found the children on an old rubbish heap sucking dirty pieces of bread.”^[8]

It is unclear just how long the children were institutionalised for, but he seems to have been able to turn his life around and find work, as by 1939 he was once again living with his eldest daughter, Edith.

When I first began searching through these old newspapers, I couldn’t help but feel that I was disrespecting my ancestors by uncovering all the dirty laundry they thought was long buried - but whatever grim story I found, whether it was a petty theft, a drunkenness charge, or outright neglect, I thought no less of them as people. Their crimes weren’t born of malice or hate, they were the product of their surroundings. They lived in a town known for its poverty and pollution, in a time when unemployment was at an all time high. They stole because they had to, they drank to drown their sorrows, and their children were neglected because they simply couldn’t afford to care for them. So, when I look back to where I came from, I don’t resent them for their wrongdoings – even if I never met them, who they were and how they lived are part of me, and I wouldn’t be here now if it weren’t for their strength.

Reference List

1. Runcorn Weekly News, 30th November 1924
“ASSAULT.- At Widnes Petty Sessions yesterday, Daniel Price, 29, Farrant Street, pleaded guilty to assaulting Michael Connor, a railway employee. He alleged that Connor persistently spoke to his wife. This the prosecutor denied.- The Bench imposed a fine of £2.”
2. Runcorn Weekly News, 3rd July 1925
“WIFE DESERTION. - At Widnes Police Court, yesterday, Daniel Price, 95, Timperley Street, was summoned by his wife, Sarah Price, for desertion. The complainant gave evidence of general neglect, and the magistrates made an order for the defendant to pay his wide 25s. a week.”
3. Runcorn Weekly News, 30th April 1926
“PUBLIC HOUSE ASSAULT.- At Widnes Petty Sessions yesterday, Daniel Price, 29, Farrant street, was summoned by James Catterall for assault. The defendant did not appear. Mr W. S. Knowles, on behalf of the complainant, stated that his client was the licensee of the Stonemason’s Arms. On Saturday night Price was in the taproom, and in consequence of the noise he was creating Catterall spoke to him and told him to be quiet. He continued his noisy mis-conduct, and when the complainant was removing some glasses Price hit him a violent blow over the eye. When Catterall was being assisted by some of the customers, Price hit him a second time. The bench imposed a fine of £2.”
4. Liverpool Echo, 4th March 1927
“FATHER OF FIVE AT 26 - Superintendent Jackson's plea for leniency on behalf of his five children saved Daniel Price (26), 20, Farrant Street, Widnes, from going to gaol. Defendant was charged at Widnes today, with stealing a sack of coal from the L.M.S. siding at Lugdale Crossing, and two pairs of boots from outside the shop of Tyler's, Limited. Price, who pleaded guilty, said he had been out of work for nine months. He had five children and his wife had left him. Alderman Neale (to prisoner).- You have to thank the superintendent for speaking on your behalf. Instead of sending you to prison you will be fined £1 in each case. The prisoner expressed his thanks.”
5. Runcorn Weekly News, 11th March 1927
“WIDNES MAN'S THEFTS. - APPEAL FOR LENIENCY. - At Widnes Police Court on Friday, a young man named Daniel Price (26) of 20, Farrant Street, pleaded guilty to stealing 42lbs. of coal from the Lugsdale sidings of the L.M. & S., and also to stealing two pairs of boots from outside the shop of Tyler's Ltd. Superintendent Jackson stated that shortly after noon on Thursday, Detective Sergeant Rigby saw prisoner coming from the direction of the railway sidings. He had the bag of coal produced, and when questioned said that he picked the coal from between the wagons. With regard to the second charge, two pairs of boots were missed on the 19th of last month. When charged on the previous day with this theft Price admitted the offence. He had sold one pair for 3/-, remarking that he had bought the boots for his boy but that they were too small. Accused said that he had five little children and he had not been working for some months. Superintendent Jackson said that Price had previously been before the court, but in view of his

position and for the sake of the children he appealed to the magistrates to inflict a fine instead of sending the man to prison. If that were done he would see what could be done for him. The magistrates (Alderman G. I. Neil and Mr. M. Ford) said that under the circumstances they would take a somewhat lenient view of the case and inflict a fine of £1 in each case.”

6. Runcorn Weekly News, 9th July 1926

“A WIDNES ASSULT CASE. – SENT TO PRISON FOR ONE MONTH. At Widnes police court yesterday James Price, 95, Timperly street, pleaded guilty to assaulting James Brandeth. The complainant said he had a chip potato shop, and on the night of June 26 Price came in. As he was drunk witness pushed him outside. On Saturday night last he again came into the shop in a drunken state and he again put him out. While witness was standing at the door Price rushed at him and struck him in the face, causing a black eye. He was locked up the same night for dunrkeness. Price now said that he was very sorry. It was all through drink. He admitted several previous convictions. He was sent to prison for one month. At Monday’s court Price was fined 10s. for being drunk of Saturday night.”

7. Runcorn Weekly News, 7th June 1929

“FOR THE CHILDREN’S SAKE. Mr. T. Swale (Messrs. Poole, Swale and Co.) applied to the Widnes magistrates yesterday for an adjournment in the case of James Price, 95, Timperley Street, summoned for neglecting his three children. He said that the children were now in the institution on Dr. Patton’s order that they had been neglected. It was a serious case. The wife was dead, and the defendant, who was out of work, was searching for work, and, of course, could not look after the children and be out. The case was adjourned for three months on the understanding that the children remained in the institution during the adjournment.”

8. Runcorn Weekly News, 13th September 1929

“CHILDREN’S WELFARE. – Widnes Magistrates’ Decision – FATHER’S APPEAL REFUSED. [...] Inspector Martin said that from the 12th February the children were not in a satisfactory condition, the home was in a much-neglected state, the bedding dirty, and the whole place dilapidated. On the 27th March he found the children on an old rubbish heap sucking dirty pieces of bread.”