

# RESEARCHING THE ORIGINS OF FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE HARRISON BELL, NEWCASTLE SUFFRAGIST AND SOCIAL REFORMER

In July 2018 I was fortunate to attend a performance of "Heaton!" at the People's Theatre, Heaton, written by Peter Dillon and directed by my cousin Chris Heckels. The production, inspired by the Great Exhibition of the North, was a festival of drama, dance, music and film to celebrate the lives of four people associated with the area. Three are well known locally; Sir Charles Parsons inventor of the steam turbine produced at his Heaton factory, Ove Arup architect of the Sydney Opera House born in Heaton and Colin Veitch captain of the Newcastle United team that won three League Championships, England international, chairman of the PFA and a founder member of the People's Theatre. The fourth person Florence Nightingale Harrison Bell is now much less well known despite a remarkable life as a teacher, suffragist and social reformer.

Florence Nightingale Harrison was a school teacher in Newcastle who married Joseph Bell, General Secretary of the National Amalgamated Union of Labour. She became active in the Independent Labour Party, a director of the Newcastle Cooperative Society and an organiser for the Women's Trade Union League. She was an early supporter of the women's suffrage movement and was secretary of the North East Society for Women's Suffrage. She may have been aware of the suffragettes' action in 1913, burning down the bowling green

pavilion at Heaton Park, but as a suffragist she was probably not directly involved and may have disapproved. Following the eventual success of the suffrage movement she became a national figure as a member of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee. In 1922 her husband became MP for Newcastle but died within a month. Attempts were made to persuade her to stand in his stead but she declined, although press reports of the time reported that she would undoubtedly have been elected. However she remained an activist supporting women's employment rights, health, birth control, education and child welfare. During Labour's time in government she was a member of an enquiry which stopped the practice of sending unaccompanied children to Canada as farm labour and was a member of a Royal Commission on Health Insurance. In the latter case she was an author of a minority report that disagreed with the Commission's finding that few changes were needed, and proposed an alternative view with recommendations which can now be seen as a vision of the future welfare state.

Despite her high profile in her later years, little has been published about the early origins of Florence Nightingale Harrison. Wikipedia gives her dates as 1865 - October 1948 but does not give an exact birth date. The Heaton History Group website says

she was born in Newcastle in 1865 but do not give a birth date. It notes that one biography gives her father as Dr Thomas Harrison but reports that they have not been able to find any trace of him. After being impressed by her story this lack of information on her origins proved a challenge I couldn't resist.

My initial searches were unsuccessful. The 1939 Register of the Population shows the widowed Florence N H Bell at 63 Bryant Ave, Slough. She is recorded as a Justice of the Peace and gives her date of birth as 8<sup>th</sup> October 1865. However there is no corresponding entry for Florence Harrison in the GRO index of birth registration in Newcastle or elsewhere and neither she nor her parents can be found in the 1871 Census of England and Wales. However Florence Harrison can be found in both the 1881 and 1891 censuses, where she is recorded as the step-daughter of Thomas H Thompson and his wife Isabella A Thompson. In 1891 Thomas and Isabella have three other children Alfred (12), Stanley (9) and Percy (6). They can all be found in the GRO birth index with mother's maiden name Tait. So Florence Harrison's mother appears to have been Isabella A Tait. However there is no marriage recorded in the GRO registration indexes of Isabella Tait (or Tate) to any Harrison anywhere in the UK.

With this information I checked the GRO indexes and found a birth registered of a Florence Tait in Newcastle for December 1865 quarter. A copy of the birth certificate showed she was born at 1 Alexandra Place with the expected birth date of 8<sup>th</sup> October 1865 and mother Isabella Tait. No father's name was recorded.

However Family Search revealed a baptism on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1865 of Florence Harrison at St. Andrew, Newcastle. The parents were Thomas Latham Harrison (gentleman) and Isabella Harrison of Alexandra Place.

Unfortunately the GRO death index shows that Thomas died less than two years later and his death on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1867 is reported in the Newcastle Daily Chronicle, along with his burial in St. Andrew's Cemetery, Jesmond on 5<sup>th</sup> October. His obituary also reveals the reason for the anecdote that Florence's father may have been a doctor. It records that Thomas Latham Harrison was well known in Newcastle as a bookmaker, known in sporting circles as "The Doctor". The London Sporting Life also noted his death and reported that "he was well known among sporting men around the country". His obituary also noted that, as a young man he had joined the Royal Artillery and served with distinction in the Crimean War Campaign, including the battles of Sebastopol, Alma and Inkerman. He received various awards and medals for courage including a gold medal for standing by his gun during an engagement when his companions had fled. At the end of the campaign in 1856 he returned to Newcastle and became a waiter at the Turk's Head Hotel. He then carried on business as a bookmaker and subsequently made a considerable amount of money when Gladiateur won the Derby (in 1865). After that he suffered from ill health until his death. Although he is recorded as married in the burial register, there is no evidence that Thomas and Isabella Tait ever married and neither Isabella nor Florence are mentioned in the newspaper reports of his death and funeral. However, although he did not leave a will,

administration of his estate was granted to his "widow" Isabella Ann Harrison of Alexandra Place, with the sum of £300. So it would appear that although Thomas Latham Harrison and Isabella Ann Tait never married they had a stable relationship, living at Alexandra Place until Thomas's early death.

After Thomas's death Florence and her mother are not found in the 1871 census for England and Wales but Ancestry provides a hint. They are recorded in the census for Scotland living at 35 Whitfield Road, South Leith. Isabella A Harrison is recorded as a widow age 25 born England, with her daughter Florence L Harrison, age 5 also born in England and from that time Florence was known as Florence Latham Harrison. A lodger Martin J Elingse, a Norwegian shipbroker, is recorded in the household. It is not clear how long Florence and her mother remained in Scotland but by 1878 they are living in Gateshead where Isabella married Thomas Hedley Thompson, an engine fitter, at Gateshead Register Office on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1878. Florence, a witness, signed the register as Florence Latham Harrison. From that time she was brought up by her mother and step-father with the family living in Gateshead, Walker and Heaton and became an elementary school teacher.

By 28<sup>th</sup> July 1896 Florence had adopted the name Florence Nightingale Harrison, when she married Joseph Nicholas Bell, a trade union secretary, at St Augustine's Church, Newcastle. Some time after their marriage they moved to 6 Hotspur Street, Heaton, where they lived for almost twenty years. A period which saw the birth of their

only child Edward Percy Bell. Around 1920 the family moved to London. The remainder of their story is well recorded elsewhere.

### Addenda

Following the performances of Heaton! a campaign by the company and friends has resulted in a successful campaign to Newcastle City Council for a "blue plaque" commemorating Florence to be installed on her long-term residence at Hotspur Street, Heaton.

Florence's son, Edward Percy Bell, followed in his parents' political path. Born in April 1902, he was educated at Rutherford College, Newcastle and King's College London. On leaving university he became a teacher with West Ham County Borough and was headmaster of Shipman County Secondary School from 1951 until 1964 when he was elected as the Labour Party member for Newham on the Greater London Council. He served on the council until 1981. He died 27<sup>th</sup> Feb 1987.

### Sources

GRO records of birth, marriage and death registrations

Censuses of England & Wales and Scotland

Parish Records

The National Newspaper Archive

The Heaton History Society website

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