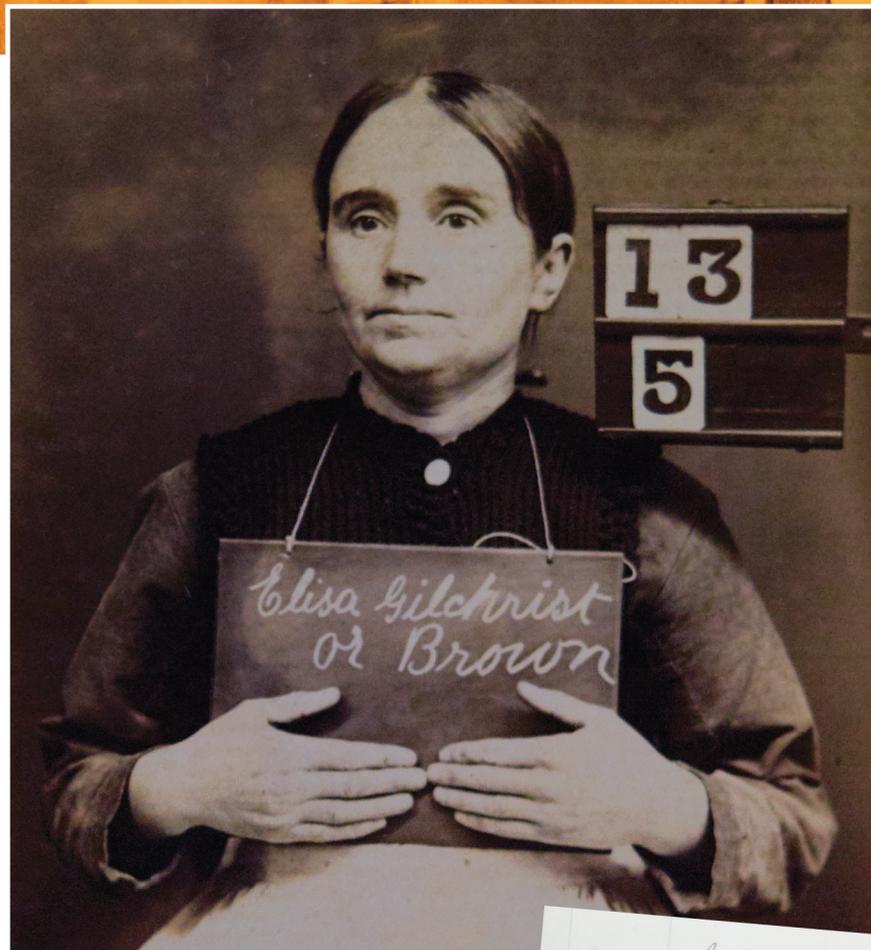


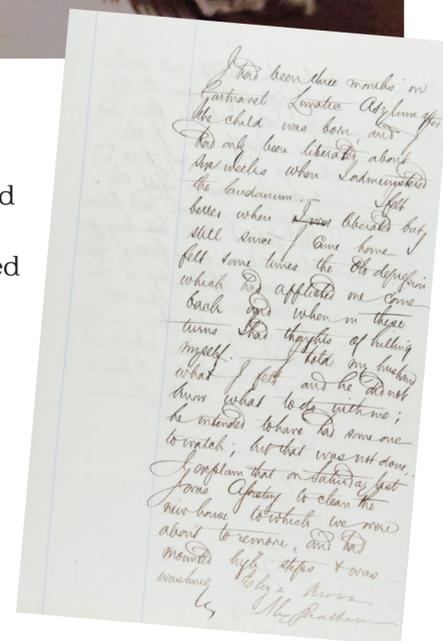
ELIZABETH GILCHRIST OR BROWN

Admitted 1868. **Murder.**

Elizabeth was aged 21 when she killed her six month old daughter Jessie by giving her laudanum because *'the child had been troublesome and was teething and I thought the laudanum would make her sleep'*. Yet moments later she added: *'I did mean to destroy her.'* An alcoholic extract of opium, laudanum was readily, cheaply, and legally available in Victorian times, widely used for pain relief – and recreationally. Laudanum was administered to Elizabeth at Glasgow Royal Lunatic Asylum, where she was twice a patient, to help her sleep during manic episodes.



Gendering could, however, work to women's advantage in eliciting sympathy. Authorities often shifted blame for wrongdoing onto menfolk, who should have behaved better. Gartnavel described her husband Robert Brown as *'a young good-for-nothing'*, whom she married when aged just 17 and who had recently died in Argentina *'after a short life of dissipation and vice'*. He allegedly neglected her and took her out of Gartnavel before she was ready, just to save money. In her pre-trial statement, Elizabeth recorded that since returning home from Gartnavel, *'I felt sometimes the old depression which had afflicted me come back and when in these turns I had thoughts of killing myself. I told my husband... and he did not know what to do with me ... I felt my mind affected and it was in that condition that I gave the laudanum to the child.'*



By the early 20th century Elizabeth had been discharged from, and readmitted to Perth CLD multiple times; at one stage her son smuggled her to America for a fresh start, but that too ended in relapse. Deemed no longer dangerous because *'her mental condition has now permanently settled down into consecutive dementia'*, she was transferred to Ayrshire District Asylum at Glengall in March 1904, and died there in 1909.



In common with many prisoner-patients, Elizabeth had a history of mental problems, which also ran in her family.

'Her ideas are confused and incoherent. She cannot rest and she is perfectly indifferent, impulsive and reckless about everything ...'

'Her homicidal tendencies have been often manifested. She is also suicidal and has very frequently attempted to destroy herself. Her reason is so far gone, and she has become so degenerated, that if not prevented she would eat excrement, anything, her own flesh; her fingers and toes especially ... Such is her present diseased state of mind that she cannot be left unattended for a single moment either by night or by day.'

Medical men focused on sex-specific physiological events like pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, when looking for causes in women. *'Puerperal insanity'* was the label applied to Elizabeth. A term used only during the 19th century, this diagnosis encompassed a wide range of symptoms, some of which might now be classed as post-partum psychosis. Prison policy was not to release puerperal maniacs until the end of their childbearing span.

Portrait: Photograph of Elizabeth Gilchrist or Brown from the Perth Criminal Lunatic Department Prison Registers, c. 1868. NRS, HH21/48/1, p289

Above: A empty bottle for laudanum tincture, late 19th or early 20th century. Wellcome Collection.

Right: Part of Elizabeth Gilchrist or Brown's declaration, taken on the 27 May, 1867. NRS, JC26/1867/241

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