

# MARGARET HUNTER OR BEATON

Admitted 1867. **Murder.**

From a family of poor Paisley handloom weavers, Margaret married James Beaton, labourer, aged just 17 years in 1860. With a history of mental disorder, she murdered her fifth child, two month old Alexander in April 1867. The first doctor to examine her after the murder was a local man, who *'found her to have a dull melancholy despairing look ... of a person labouring under disease of the brain'*. Too insane to plead, Margaret was not tried until October that year when she was found guilty and immediately admitted to Perth CLD. Margaret told her sister Catherine: *'I have killed my wean.'* Catherine and several other witnesses said that the death of their mother nine days before the murder had affected Margaret badly. Emotional causes of mental problems, such as bereavement, were usually reserved for females. The after-effect of childbirth was also a factor.



Over a period of years her Perth case notes ranged from *'outrageous, incoherent, delusional'* at worst, to *'an unstable temper'* at best. In spring 1877 she was *'very excited, filthy and obscene in her talk. To be locked in padded room and have strong purgative.'* With few staff, physical restraint was occasionally used on dangerous patients. Medical treatments for mental disorders were largely limited, until the 20th century, to traditional palliatives and evacuants.

The reason for the outburst? *'She recently got a letter from her friends [relations] telling her they had no means of accommodating her, even though she was conditionally liberated.'* This may have been wise. During one of her later conditional discharges in 1889, Margaret assaulted her brother George's wife and burned her own clothes, causing him to renounce his guardianship. The medical superintendent and two prison officers who went to collect Margaret found her *'noisy and incoherent, with occasional furious bursts of maniacal excitement ... her mind has completely broken down'*.

She kept petitioning unsuccessfully for release, one letter of January 1895 annotated simply: *'A lunatic full of delusions'*.

With feeling, the medical superintendent concluded: *'This poor woman seems only to be sane in confinement.'*

She was eventually discharged, in February 1898, to Glasgow District Asylum at Gartloch, a general asylum, after 31 years at Perth. Transferred from there to Govan District Asylum, Paisley, in October 1898, she was released, aged 60, in October 1903, but had to be brought back a few days later and *'is likely to remain to the end'*.



**Portrait:** Photograph of Margaret Hunter or Beaton from the Perth Criminal Lunatic Department Prison Registers, c. 1867. NRS, HH21/48/1, p281

**Left:** A woman prisoner in solitary confinement in Woking Convict Invalid Prison, 1889. Wellcome Collection

**Above:** Restraint Belt, early 20th century. Scottish Prison Service. Photograph taken by Professor Rab Houston

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