

Edgar Allen: 'A Man from Sheffield' Part II

This is an edited version of part of a talk given by Sue Roe for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor.

The story of Edgar Allen, whose career I discussed in my last blog becomes even more intriguing after his death. This is thanks to Eric Simons, the Publicity Manager at Edgar Allen & Co. – a man nearly as interesting as Edgar Allen himself.



Edgar Allen News

Born in Birmingham, by 1911 Eric Norman Simons was living in Sheffield. During World War One he was reputed to be a spy, probably because he spoke more than one language. He wrote fiction and poetry from his teens and he published his first novel in 1928. In addition to further novels and some biographies he wrote books on metallurgy and cricket. Joining Edgar Allen & Co. in 1911, he worked his way up to become advertising and publicity manager. In 1919 he was one of the founder editors of Edgar Allen News.

Simons set out to write a history of the Edgar Allen Company. This was published in several editions of the company magazine in 1953. To this end, he tried to track down Allen's friends, former employees of the company and his Rudelhoff relatives. He wrote many letters and interviewed people with some success, all of which are in the Sheffield Archives. Alongside these documents are many photos of Edgar Allen. There are three reasons for this

uncommonly large collection of images: firstly, Simons' persistence in tracking them down; secondly the generosity of his relatives in sending them to Simons and lastly Allen's obvious delight in having his picture taken. When he first came to Sheffield, he was quickly photographed in militia uniform!

The letters from workers past and present and from the family and friends of Edgar Allen reveal fascinating personal details about the man. He seemed to have been an excellent employer. When he moved into Whirlow House in 1904, he had part of the grounds made into a cricket pitch and, up to 1913, an Edgar Allen team played every Saturday.

There were annual staff trips in horse drawn charabancs for instance to Monsal Dale. On one occasion they halted at Whirlow House and Allen personally presented flowers and chocolates to the ladies, cigars to the men and cigarettes to the office boys. On another trip, to Ollerton, a fresh salmon tea was laid on in a large marquee on the lawn of an inn at Dukeries. He once gave a party for his foremen at Whirlow House, where they could drink as much as they liked!

Several testified to his charm, generosity and hospitality. He catered to the comfort of his lady visitors, providing hairpins and varieties of scent and powder. He gave lavish dinners at Clevedon and Whirlow House. Apparently,



Edgar Allen in militia uniform



Eric Simons

he had a favourite cat which used to sit on his shoulder during dinner while his dog, Fronie, sat at his feet and was fed scraps under the table.

Obviously a bit of a lady's man, he always wore a button hole. Invitations to the daughters of his directors for lunch in town were common: "Those innocent little ladies insisted on a short walk after lunch which always led them to (but not past) the Goldsmiths Company."

But the big question Simons was keen to answer was the mystery of Edgar Allen's parentage. According to websites like 'hawleysheffieldknives', Mary Ann Ovenden was his mother not his aunt. However, Simons, for some reason, was not convinced.

There has also been much speculation about the identity of his father. Some have even suggested the eccentric fifth Earl of Portland. He was known to have had several illegitimate children.

Another line of enquiry was an Irish connection. Certainly, his ex-wife thought so. In the divorce case she accused her husband of possessing "the immoral character of the woman who bore you, and the dishonourable one of the man who made you, combined with one of the worst cross-breeds there could be - namely - German and Irish combined - with a lack of moral or religious training."

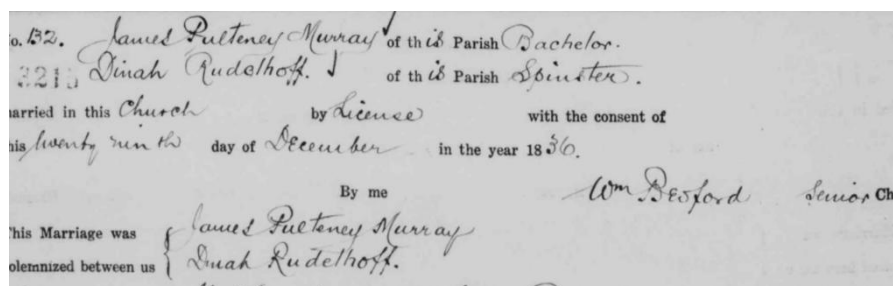
Simons had letters published in a variety of Irish newspapers trying to find an Irish connection. Sadly, there were no helpful replies. Even the Worksop tomb was opened up. According to the cemetery keeper, personal and private documents had been placed in the vault along with his ashes. Simons had to get permission and the vault was duly opened 21st October 1952. Sadly, it was a fruitless search.



Edgar Allen

The letters from the Rudelhoff family were more helpful. It seemed to be common knowledge within the family that his mother was in fact Dinah Rudelhoff, Mary Ann's older sister, who had been seduced by William Allen, the son of a local undertaker. Dinah had been sent to family in Germany to have the baby. However, it was thought that she probably died there, and he was sent back to his aunt who raised him.

Simons contacted German authorities to get definitive proof of this but such evidence was not forthcoming. Interestingly Edgar Allen never called himself William although it was his first forename. I agreed with Simons' conviction that Dinah was Edgar Allen's mother, until I found a copy of a marriage certificate in Tasmania in 1836, between one Dinah Rudelhoff and James Pulteney Murray.



Marriage certificate between Dinah Rudelhoff and James Pulteney Murray.

This could be a reliable source: Dinah Rudelhoff is not a very common name. The compulsory registration of births was not introduced until 1836, so Allen's birth-date of 1837 given in the 1841 census could be his baptism, not his actual date of birth. Also, it would explain why Simons could find no evidence of Dinah's death in Germany. I am grateful to Peter Marrison who pointed me to the Dinah Rudelhoff, a well-known Australian actor and manager who could have been Allen's mother. It would have been a close-run thing: she arrived in Australia, August 1834, on the female immigrant ship the Strathfieldsay, sailed back to England in May 1835 then, according to the The Hobart Town Courier, 30 December 1836, she returned to Australia with Mr Murray in September of that year. There wasn't much time for her to be seduced by William Allen. Interestingly there is evidence that she had had an onboard romance before. The mystery of Allen's parentage is one we may never solve!



Edgar Allen's grave

There is little left of Edgar Allen's legacy now. The company was taken over by Aurora Holdings in 1979 which went bust in 1983. The famous Imperial Works at Tinsley closed in 1988 and was later demolished in the 1990s to make way for Meadowhall Shopping Centre. The Edgar Allen Library was replaced by the Western Bank Library, and the Rotunda is now offices for the Registrar and Secretary. The Edgar Allen Institute was merged with the NHS in 1948, eventually closing in the 1980s. It was demolished and a new building erected on the site; part of this is Edgar Allen House which belongs to the University of Sheffield.

Perhaps it is time there was a memorial in the city to this adopted son of Sheffield for his work and philanthropy.

Sue Roe
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