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## ALIAS GRACE



# Alias Grace

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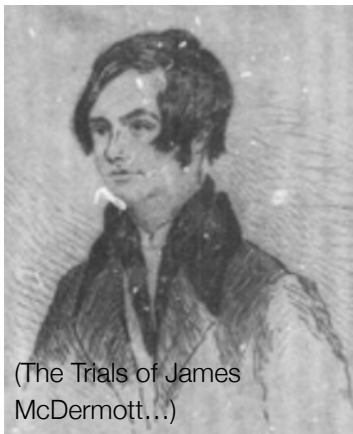
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## THE TRUE STORY

### What Really Happened

The murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery was reported in 1843. Kinnear and Montgomery were having an affair. Montgomery was pregnant with Kinnear's child. Montgomery was attacked with an ax and finished off by strangulation. Her body was found in the cellar under a tub. Kinnear was found shot in the chest (The Trials of James McDermott...). Grace Marks and James McDermott were arrested for the crime. The real Grace Marks was an Irish immigrant who worked as a maid to Thomas Kinnear. She was sixteen years old when the murder occurred. This would make her 24 by the time she meets Simon in *Alias Grace*. Simon Jordan was a character created by Margaret Atwood and did not exist in real life. The real Grace was sentenced to life in prison for her involvement in the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. How exactly she participated in the murders was never defined in court (The Trials of James McDermott...).

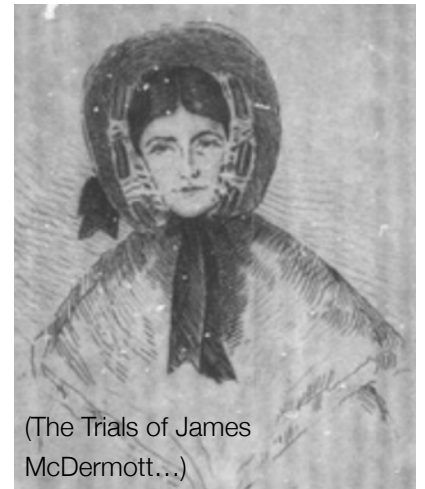


(The Trials of James McDermott...)

The real James McDermott was a Catholic Irish immigrant who had been in Canada for six months. He enlisted in the 1st Provincial Regiment of the Province of Lower Canada. After being discharged, he moved to Toronto in search of work. At the time of the murder, James McDermott was about twenty years old. He was described as a slim man with a "swarthy

complexion". McDermott admitted that he was angry about the way Nancy treated him. A few days before the murder, Grace told McDermott that Nancy had given them warning to leave (The Trials of James McDermott...). Perhaps

this was McDermott's motive, but what was Grace's? Some speculate that Marks was jealous of Nancy. Others say that she didn't approve of Nancy's air of superiority. Marks gave several different accounts of what happened. In one account she insisted that she could not remember what happened on the day of the murders. In another account she claimed to have been temporarily possessed by a dead friend of hers (presumably Mary Whitney) (The Trials of James McDermott...).



(The Trials of James McDermott...)



## In and Around Toronto

Mr. Kinnear's farmstead was located in the southern part of the York Region of Ontario, Canada. It is now an upscale neighborhood about an hour outside of Toronto called Richmond Hill. In the 1840's Richmond Hill would have been about half a day's journey from the heart of Toronto. The Richmond Hill area was originally settled as part of the Toronto Purchase in 1787 ("Historical Maps of Toronto: 1787-1805 Plan of the Toronto Purchase."). In the early 19th century Thomas Kinnear bought lot 48 on Yonge Street, the main street running through Richmond Hill ("History of Richmond Hill Ontario.").

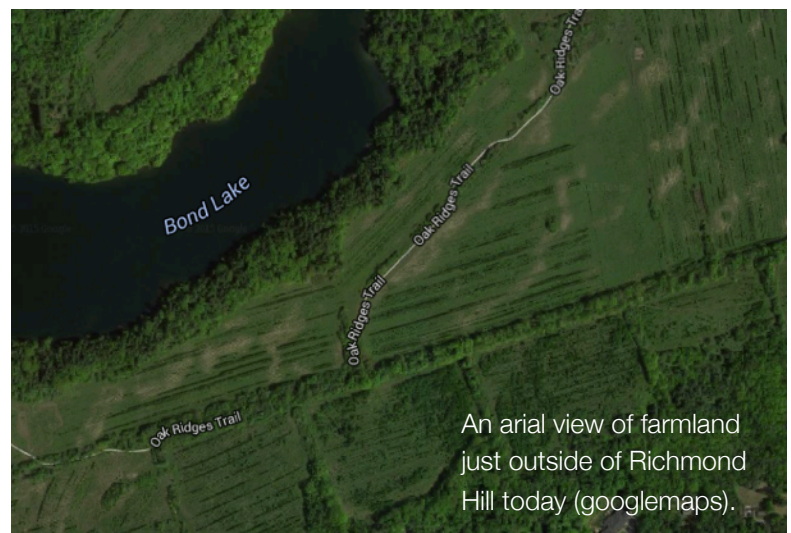


A map of part of the Toronto Purchase. The red circle indicates the area where Richmond hill is located ("Historical Maps of Toronto: 1787-1805 Plan of the Toronto Purchase



Toronto is located in the southern part of Canada, not far at all from the United States. Consequently, the cultures were very similar. Toronto was not the land of Eskimos. It was actually very similar to the United States, especially the areas heavily occupied by Irish Immigrants.

The farmland in Richmond Hill was very similar to the farmland in Indiana. It was very flat and lent itself to the growing of grains. Although, in the 1860's farmers began to grow grapes for the production of wine.



An arial view of farmland just outside of Richmond Hill today (googlemaps).

### The Penitentiary

Grace was admitted to the Provincial Penitentiary of the Province of Upper Canada in Kingston, Ontario. This is where the real Grace was imprisoned for 30 years before she was pardoned and disappeared. This establishment was opened in 1835 ("Canada's Penitentiary Museum."). In 1836, a typical day of food for the prisoners would look something like this:



"for breakfast, half a pound of bread, a third of a pound of fresh beef, potatoes, a pint of coffee and molasses. For dinner, inmates receive the same meal, replacing the coffee and molasses with a quart of soup. Sunday supper is a larger quantity of bread alongside the same fresh beef and potatoes, but for the rest of the week, the prisoners eat a quart of porridge with a side of molasses for supper" (Cameron).

In 1847 the prisoners of Richmond Hill were made to suffer horrible punishments including,

"The Box, a coffin-shaped wooden container that is held upright with an inmate trapped inside for six to nine hours. Guards sometimes jab the prisoner with a stick through the breathing hole. The cat-o'-nine-tails is a rawhide whip used to lash prisoners no more than 36 times, or 50 for assaulting an officer" (Cameron).

Thankfully, in 1849, a newspaper published an article exposing this horrible treatment. As a result, the warden was dismissed (Cameron).

This map shows all of the locations mentioned in the play and how they are connected.



## IRISH IMMIGRANTS

Grace, Mary, and McDermott were all Irish immigrants to Canada. They all came from the usual impoverished background of an Irish immigrant. In Ireland Irish families began with a late age of marriage. Most Irish families had many children, and the boys held higher positions than the girls. Each Irish son was entitled to an equal share of his father's property, while the daughters received nothing (Mannion 33). The women in Irish culture functioned totally separately from the men (Diner). These same family standards were carried across the ocean with the Irish when they immigrated. Once in the Americas, the Irish families set up the same standard homes they lived in in Ireland. The typical Irish house was a single-roomed cabin about 15' by 15' with mud floors, thatched roofs, and walls of stone, sod, or mud (Mannion 33). The Irish peasant culture was easily influenced by wherever they were living, in this case, Toronto (Mannion 165). In Upper Canada 2/3 of the Irish population were protestant through the 19th century (Elliott 3). James McDermott was Catholic, making him even more of a minority than he already was.



Irish single-roomed cabin- Grace and McDermott would have lived in homes like this (Irish Cottage).



Interior of Irish cabin(Ulster American Folk Park).

### The Irish of North

Tipperary, Ireland were used to small farming villages and numerous corn mills. North Tipperary was economically backwards because it was entirely dependent on agriculture. The economy really began to go under in the early 1800s, and it only got worse with the potato famine in 1845. This is why many left for the Americas (Elliott 9). Irish women emigrated for better economic opportunities, but the majority of Irish women got stuck with domestic work (Diner). Still, domestic work was better than what was available in Ireland. Many young women wrote

home about the abundant opportunities available in North America.

Some immigrants to Canada were poor Irish like McDermott, but others were wealthy gentlemen from Great Britain like Kinnear. The tension between these two groups ran very high. The Irish immigrants led two uprisings in 1837 and 1838 against the British in control. This could certainly be why McDermott feels so hostile toward Kinnear ("The Rebellions of 1837-1838.").

## DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER (DID)

The doctors who worked with Grace never suspected that she had Dissociative Identity Disorder because no one believed that such a thing existed. People who exhibited signs of DID were thought to be possessed. No one really knows for sure if Grace Marks had DID, but Margaret Atwood wrote *Alias Grace* to explore the possibility. Now we know that DID does in fact exist, even though it is incredibly rare. “DID is an exaggeration of normal and natural psychological functioning that arises as a consequence of severe circumstances” (Spira xxx). DID used to be known as Multiple Personality Disorder, but the name was changed because it is not a personality disorder (Spira). Personality disorders are mental illnesses that involve longterm patterns of unhealthy thoughts or behaviors, like Antisocial Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, or Paranoia Disorders (“Personality Disorders: MedlinePlus.”). DID is not a personality disorder. It is an exaggeration of the natural mental process of dissociation. PTSD, Schizophrenia, and other mental illnesses often go hand in hand with DID (Spira xxi).

### Symptoms

DID can be diagnosed when someone has two or more distinct personalities that recurrently take control of the person’s behavior. The person must also present lapses in memory too extensive to be attributed to ordinary forgetfulness. Finally, the symptoms must not be caused by substance abuse or another medical condition (Spira XX).

### Alters

Each different personality is called an alter. The alters are created to “bear the unbearable.” They work together, sometimes aware of what the other is doing, sometimes not. Some alters have memories that other alters know nothing about (*Multiple Personality Disorder*). Some alters are often oblivious to the existence of other alters (xxi). One or two alters are usually predominant. The patient usually identifies one of these as the ‘original personalities.’ If one of these predominant alters is gentle and submissive, the other is usually strong and aggressive (Spira xxi). Name, age, body posture, movements, voice, eyesight, handwriting, vocabulary, accent, social skills, gender, and physiological processes can also change from alter to alter. A person with DID can have over 100 alters. The switch between alters is sudden and often dramatic, taking only a few seconds. These switches can be caused by hypnosis or when one alter is overwhelmed. In the case of the latter another alter will come out who is better able to handle the situation (Spira xx). In *Alias Grace* Mary emerges to deal with situations that Grace is too weak to handle. In some circumstances a violent alter may emerge to punish a functionally successful alter (Spira xxi). The ‘unconscious’ is an alter that can only be accessed during a trance. This alter has access to all past and present information. Other alters are unaware that this alter even exists (Spira). Mary seems exhibit these qualities when Grace is placed under hypnosis.



## Causes

DID usually begins in a child's early years of development, but some sufferers do not exhibit these signs of DID until their late teens or early twenties. DID is triggered by severe continual abuse in childhood (*Multiple Personality Disorder*). This abuse is "often perpetrated by a loved one (parent/sibling) or in a trusted organization (such as a school or day care setting)." The abuse occurs over a long period of time in a way that gives the abused child no external resources to rely on. The abuse could be direct, but witnessing severe abuse of one family member by another can have the same effects (Spira xxvi). DID is an escape for a tortured mind (and often body) from a completely overwhelming situation (Spira xxviii). Spira says, "when the abuse is so extreme that even simple dissociation cannot blunt the pain, it can be useful to divide the pain among various people and places within one's dissociative realm" (Spira xxx). Some DID sufferers claim to have been ritually abused by satanic cults. Contrary to popular belief these cults do actually exist in the United States. However, some patients blame cults because it is easier than accusing those close to them. Any claim against a cult should be thoroughly investigated (Spira xxxi).

## Treatment

Because DID was not recognized as a mental illness in the 1800s, Grace never received any treatment. She remained in the penitentiary until she was acquitted. In modern psychology, however, DID is treated by regular therapy and several drugs to control the symptoms. Patients with DID need regular therapy for most of their lives, but DID can be controlled and even sometimes eliminated with proper treatment (Spira). In order to help someone with DID, a therapist must develop a foundation of compassion, empathy, trust, and stability (xxxv). Gathering information slowly will help the therapist gain the patient's trust. Patients want to be understood up to a point when an alter may want to withhold information, either because the alter does not want to reveal information to other alters, or the alter does not want to reveal information to the therapist (Spira xxxv). Hypnosis can often be used to facilitate switching between alters for therapeutic purposes, especially for alters who are reluctant to emerge or difficult to access (Spira xlv). Jeremiah's hypnosis of Grace was, in fact, founded in science and is a method that psychologists still use today.

## Definitions (Spira li)

These definitions may be helpful for the portrayal of Grace because her character exhibits many of these terms.

**Abreaction** - The reliving of an experience in such a way that previously repressed emotions associated with it are released.

**Alter**- One of the various personalities that the patient 'splits' into to cope with overwhelming distress.

**Dissociative Amnesia** - a disorder characterized by an inability to recall important personal information, usually of a traumatic and stressful nature, that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness.

**Object Relations** - different alters associated with different objects (Simon uses this knowledge when he brings different object to his meetings with Grace).

**Switching** - the emergence of an alter personality that has been in the background.

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Please watch the following video to learn more and to witness the dramatic differences between alters.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q66NRhaIVVY>

## GLOSSARY

**Strabismus-** “Strabismus, more commonly known as cross-eyed or wall-eyed, is a vision condition in which a person can not align both eyes simultaneously under normal conditions” (“What Is Strabismus?”). In laymen’s terms: crosseyed

**Neurohypnitism-** the original word for hypnotism, which is “the science dealing with the induction of hypnosis” (“Hypnotism.”).

**The Apocrypha-** “The Apocrypha refer to texts which are left out of officially sanctioned versions ('canon') of the Bible” (“The Apocrypha.”). Some books included in the Apocrypha are *Tobias*, *Judith*, *Wisdom*, and *Daniel*. The story of Susanna and the Elders is found in the book *Daniel chapter 13*.

**Painting of Susanna and the Elders-** a baroque painting by Guercino of the lady Susannah, mentioned in The Apocrypha. In this painting the elders are trying to persuade Susannah to lie with them in the garden.



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