

The murder of Martha Nash 1885

Why?



Martha Ann Nash

1879 – 1885

Safe in the arms of Jesus

We searched for a long time but with no success.
We couldn't find her grave.

Martha Ann Nash, buried in December 1885.
Aged 6.

Llangyfelach cemetery is sometimes overgrown.
It was closed for burials in 1890 because it was
full.. It is still not ready to reveal its secrets and the
stones themselves are sinking into a lost past. No
one seems to know where she is now.

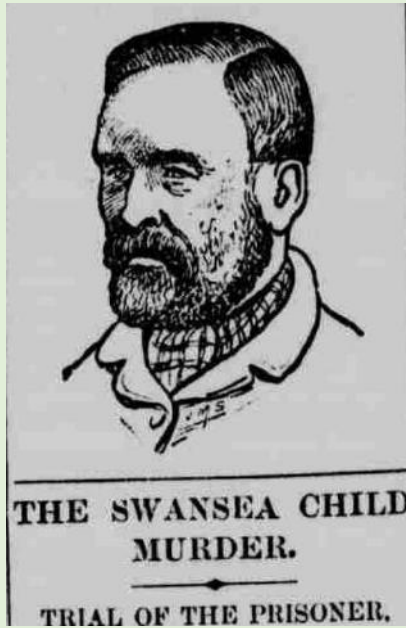
Poor Martha. Abandoned in death, just as she had
been abandoned in life.

There was a moment when it wasn't like this. For
a brief moment she was somebody. When the
English Baptist Band of Hope led the funeral
procession to St. David's Church in Llangyfelach,
near Swansea. As they left the house, they played

‘Safe in the arms of Jesus.’ Tragically, Martha hadn’t been safe in the hands of her father.

The charge which is now said to hang over the head of Thomas Nash is one of a peculiarly heinous character. It is that of wilful murder – the murder not of a fellow being who had opposed or angered him and so called forth the madness of hot ungovernable blood, but the murder of his own child – a young, innocent, inoffensive and helpless infant – a child of only six years of age. It is difficult to imagine what could be the motive that could actuate a father to take the life of his female child of such a tender age.

As we look at the facts of this wretched case, we can see that whatever Nash did or did not do, he was a confused and desperate man. The details of the case may take up a whole page of densely packed print in The Cambrian newspaper, but the facts are simple. He walked on to Swansea pier, hand in hand with his little girl in a storm, and he returned almost immediately without her. She was washed up, drowned, on the beach a couple of hours later. There were no witnesses but no one worried too much about that. Everyone believed they knew what he had done.



Thomas Nash's life had become too complicated for him, an ordinary working class man who may have seen only a physical solution to a complex emotional issue.

He is about the medium stature and of tolerably powerful rough build. He has hair of a brown colour, cut short, and face wholly shaven with the exception of a heavy moustache. His facial skin is tanned with outdoor exposure. He was dressed in a worn pilot-cloth outside jacket, worn cloth waistcoat, brown worsted Cardigan jacket, open in front and revealing a grey Welsh flannel shirt, without collar and necktie.

He was originally from Castle Martin in Pembrokeshire and he had done a number of jobs and lived in a number of places as he worked hard to support his family. In the 1881 census he is described as a '*furnaceman*.'

By 1885 he was working as a labourer for Swansea Corporation and was living in the Hafod area. Most importantly, he had been widowed a few years earlier. His wife Martha had died, leaving him to care for two daughters, Sarah seventeen and Martha Ann who was six. As often happened in those times, he had to find some way of caring for them whilst still going to work himself.

The family had lodged with Eliza Goodwin for about three years. She insisted on telling the court, '*I do not keep a lodging house but I take respectable men as lodgers*.' An important distinction obviously, though she had probably started to change her opinion of Thomas Nash three weeks before the awful incident on Swansea pier.

In early November 1885, Nash moved out of the lodgings without saying where he was going and leaving his children behind. He popped back one night when Eliza was out to collect his things but showed no interest in settling his outstanding bill, which was accumulating steadily. Sarah didn't have any regular work, so the children and Eliza were in

a bit of a fix. Eliza told the court

On the following Tuesday after he left I saw the accused passing the house in a cart and I called him into the house and asked him when he was going to fetch the children and pay me. He said he would come and fetch the children that evening but he never came.

Eliza kept on looking after the girls but was getting irritated by Nash's evasions. She then saw him on the road to Morriston and, again, he said he would come to fetch the girls. She told him *'I can't possibly afford to keep them. It is more than I can do.'*

Again he didn't collect them, so she decided to take matters into her own hands. It was 5 December 1885 and Friday was payday for Corporation workers so Eliza took Martha down to the Townhall. Confronting him at the pay office, she gave Nash two things – his daughter and a bill for £1 16s 2d. He promised he would pay the bill on Saturday.

'Shall I come home with you, Mrs. Goodwin?' asked Martha.

'No my dear. You must go with your father.'

That was the last time Eliza ever saw Martha alive.

Nash's problem went a little further than mere finance. He'd moved out of Mrs Goodwin's house in order to get married on 16 November 1885 to Margaret Bowen, aged 27.

He hadn't told Margaret that he had any children.

Obviously, he had no idea how to deal with the situation in which he found himself. It would have been one thing to suddenly admit to a daughter called Sarah, who was now out at work. But it would be something else entirely, to produce a little six-year old, dressed in '*a little red turn-over, straw hat, pinafore.*' You would think that Martha was not a detail that you could forget.

You can see that he had no idea what to do.

It was a wild night, with a howling wind and waves crashing over the pier as all the witnesses would testify. Nash left the pay office and walked hand-in-hand with Martha on to Swansea pier. The tide was high.

Two men, Owen and Fender were watching.

We thought it was strange to see a man and child

out on the pier on such a night.

It was not an occasion for taking the view. The only reason the two men were there was because they were working.

Then moments later they saw Nash alone, jumping down on to the sand.

Where was the child?

They chased after Nash and asked him. '*She is on the top,*' he said.

If this was the case, then why he had left her there? Fender and Owen decided they should keep hold of him until the police arrived.

Nash then said that he'd left Martha under the pier.

The suspicions they had formed were being re-enforced, especially when Nash himself tried to walk into the sea. They restrained him and Nash then became silent, refusing to speak.

When PC Davies arrived, Nash changed his story once again. He now said he'd put Martha on the rail of the pier in order to carry her on his back and she had fallen off. Then he became silent again.

A short while later they found her, washed up on the beach.

There was nothing much else to say. Nash was arrested and searched. In his pocket they found 19s 6d and Eliza's bill.

The due processes of the law dissected the details minutely, but there was little else to be revealed. No one else was involved. And there could be no other interpretation of these events. It was open and shut.

Throughout the proceedings Nash said nothing, *'maintaining a dejected attitude.'* He *'clasped his cap in his hands and kept his eyes down upon the front rail of the dock.'* There was no one to speak for him. Not one of the witnesses was ever questioned by the defence because there was no one there to do it, for Nash declined representation at any of the preliminary hearings. The only person who showed any sympathy towards him was Sarah (*'a clean, tidy and respectable-looking girl.'*) who cried bitterly and tried to comfort him, but Thomas Nash had drawn completely into himself.

Whether he threw little Martha off the pier or not, his reactions to her disappearance condemned him. He hadn't beaten her - there were no marks on her body - but if he had wanted to put her on his back, he could either have lifted her directly or used the seats on the pier. He had shown no alarm when first

confronted about her disappearance, then given conflicting accounts.

It was either murder or it was carelessness. But the inevitable verdict was guilty and he was condemned to death.

There can be no doubt that he was bewildered by the position he found himself in and his behaviour in court would support this. Who can really say what happened? It is hard to believe he picked her up and threw her into the sea. Perhaps he did sit her on the rail whilst desperately seeking a solution in his mind and she fell off. His explanation is so feeble that it could quite possibly be true. And no one had actually seen what had happened. Everything was assumption. But there is a limited range of possibilities here.

Attempts to win a reprieve were doomed, given the nature of his crime. That picture of a little girl dead on the beach was sufficient. There were petitions organised by Reverend Mr. Snelling – there were always petitions when anyone was executed, for the death sentence aroused strong opposition – but few signatories.

Throughout his imprisonment, Thomas Nash received no visitors, other than Sarah. His new wife seems to have vanished. He was a lost and

abandoned man.

He was hanged on Monday 1 March 1886, with a crowd estimated at 4000 waiting outside Swansea prison for the black flag to be hoisted, despite a heavy snowfall overnight.

About seven minutes to eight, after the chaplain had left the condemned man's cell, Berry, the executioner, entered it with the pinioning straps in his hands.

He was led the short walk to the execution hall, across the fresh snow. His last words were 'Lord have mercy on my soul.'

Nothing marks where Nash was buried. And there is today no sign of where Martha was buried either. Poor Martha, innocent but unwanted, an inconvenience, a victim. She was destined for a pauper's grave until the neighbours stepped in. '*In every sphere of life there beat some noble hearts.*' Those who had known Martha Ann's mother, rallied round. Mrs. Miles and Mrs. Boys collected the money and Mrs. Davies, who lived opposite the grocer Mr. Lewis, '*took the little corpse into her house...where dozens of the children who had known the deceased took occasion to look at her in her little coffin where she lay more as if sleeping than the victim of a fearful tragedy.*' She then went

by procession to Llangyfelach church where she was buried with her mother.

'The ceremony concluded with the hymn 'It is well with my soul,' which was most effectively sung.'

But a life barely started that ended on Swansea pier in a December storm. And even if we can't find her, we should not forget.



This story appears in my book, *Swansea Murders*. It is a book which explores 25 stories from Swansea's history. The earliest is from 1730 and the last is the awful story of the murder of Muriel Drinkwater in 1946.

If you would like to find out some more about the book then click on this link below and you can watch a short presentation about the book on my YouTube Channel.

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