AIMS For a better birth...

My oldest birth stories

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By Anne Glover

This is my maternal grandmother Mary, who was born on Derry's walls in 1902. I've grown up with her amazing and very positive birth stories since I was a little girl, which I do believe subconsciously led me to being a doula. She gave birth to all six of her babies at home between 1933 and 1944, even though she only started her mothering journey when she was 31 years old.

In Northern Ireland in the 1920s the province had the highest maternal mortality and second highest infant mortality in the UK. The maternal mortality rate was 7.3 per 1000 live births. Home birth was the norm as there was no maternity hospital outside of Belfast. In 1924, Sir Dawson Bates led an enquiry into the provision of a health service, yet it wasn't until 1936 that the first enquiry into maternal mortality was held.[1]

There was no NHS then and I never heard my grandmother mention midwives, only district nurses, or community nurses. It was neighbours, or untrained midwives known as 'handywomen' in Ireland,[2] who supported each other during labour, birth and with parenting. The doctor would have been called if there was a problem or when the mother was ready to give birth, so he could administer chloroform. Fathers were not expected to be at the birth, as giving birth was generally viewed as women's work. It was the district nurses who called at the homes to check on the babies and mothers.

My grandmother's first baby was born breech, and he lived into his 80s. The district nurse assisted her birth, as there were no doctors around on the day he was born. It was the 2nd July 1933 and quite a spectacle was happening in the city on that particular day. An Italian air armada, 24 Savoia-Marchetti twin-hulled flying-boats led by General Balbo, had just landed in Derry for refuelling enroute to America, and all the doctors in the vicinity were at this unusual event.[3] My grandmother's birthing story goes that the baby pooed as he was being born, bottom first, and the district nurse said he wouldn't have a care in the world!

Her second baby was due in February and arrived in December, so he was born premature, probably at 32 weeks. He was around 3lb and kept in a drawer, rubbed with olive oil daily and wrapped in cotton wool. Breastmilk was expressed with a glass extractor (see photo below) and fed by glass dripper into her baby's mouth, with my grandmother squeezing his cheeks together to imitate a sucking motion, until he was able to breastfeed.



Four healthy bonny girls followed at 18-month intervals (9 months breastfeeding and 9 months pregnant), all born at home. There was not so much chat about these births, so they must have been fairly uneventful compared to the first 2!

It's rather incredible that my grandmother had 6 successful home births and 6 healthy babies, who were all then breastfed for 9 months. Living conditions were very different then to what we know nowadays. For example, there was no hot running water in any of the homes where my grandmother gave birth. Instead a kettle would have been sitting on the range all day long to provide hot water, mainly for tea! The toilet was outside, and a bathroom was unheard of. There was no central heating either, remembering that her second baby was born prematurely during winter.

Interestingly, mothers kept their babies in bed with them at night time, not only for ease of breastfeeding, but also to keep warm. Isn't it ironic that babies born at home then benefited enormously from physiological birth, microbiome, breastfeeding – all the natural aspects that some mothers and parents today struggle to find the necessary support and respect for?

By the time my mother came to birthing her babies in the 60s, the maternity services had changed as a result of the NHS and new maternity facilities. My mother chose to have her first baby in a private nursing home, as she had heard some rumours about babies having sore feet from being left in cots in the new local maternity hospital. It was her most traumatic birth, as she tells the tale of her baby being stuck in the birth canal for a long time, but she did have a vaginal birth. Her second baby was born in a hospital, and her third baby at home. So my mother had the full experience of maternity services in the 1960s and she would happily tell you that the birth at home was by far the easiest, even with a bonny 10lber!

Author Bio: Anne Glover works as a doula in Northern Ireland.

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1 O'Sullivan JF. Two hundred years of midwifery 1806-2006. Ulster Med J. 2006 Sep;75(3):213-22. PMID: 16964815; PMCID: PMC1891762. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1891762/

2 Breathnach C. (2016). Handywomen and Birthing in Rural Ireland, 1851–1955. Gender and History, volume 28, pages 34-56. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-0424.12176

3 Derry Journal (March 30th 2022) July 1933: when Derry went Italian for six memorable days. https://www.derryjournal.com/heritage-and-retro/retro/july-1933-when-derry-went-italian-for-six-memorable-days-3632976