Jimmy Kinnon – the early days

By Redmer Y
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Background

We hear his voice at every NA meeting, in ten thousand rooms across the world. It rings out every time an addict reads the literature he first typed in his front room half a century ago. We relax as we hear his promise of freedom from active addiction: ‘as long as we follow this way, we have nothing to fear’.

It is the voice of Jimmy Kinnon, often called the ‘founder of Narcotics Anonymous’, the humble workingman from Sun Valley who helped organised that first breakthrough meeting at ‘Dad’s Club’ in August1953.

We know Jimmy K as the writer of our Gratitude Prayer, author of much of the Little White Book and designer of the distinctive NA Logo. We know he’s responsible for the revolutionary decision to put the word ‘addiction’ in the first of our 12 Steps.

But we know only a few tantalising scraps of information about his Irish roots, his boyhood in Scotland, his family’s agonising voyage to America in the early years of the 20th century. Little has been written about his long and painful battles with addiction that led him towards recovery in California in 1950.

The material in this folder offers new insights into the formative childhood years of Jimmy K, as we celebrate the centenary of his birth. A quantity of archived records of his life after recovery - and role in establishing NA already exists.

Included here is fresh and revealing information about his early life. Internet access for researchers is now providing more ready access to important historical and genealogical information. Immigration records allow us to directly examine the background to formative events in his life such as the Kinnon family’s dramatic experiences on Ellis Island in 1923.

A rough scribble on a ship’s log, for example, allows us to find out for the first time what really happened on the island, and why Jimmy always spoke of his great fear at being separated from his parents.

Assembling these pieces of the historical jigsaw can help us better understand Jimmy Kinnon, this humble addict whose visionary contribution helped change all our lives.
1. The boy from Paisley

If you stand at Ballycastle, on the rugged coast of Northern Ireland, you can see right across to the hills of Scotland. There, fifteen miles over the Irish Sea, looms the mist-shrouded headland, or Mull of Kintyre, as immortalised in the 1977 Paul McCartney song.

Midway through the 19th century, thousands of Irish Catholics headed across this wild stretch of water, fleeing a homeland devastated by potato famine and religious persecution. As many as one million people deserted Ireland during these terrible years. A million more of those who stayed behind died from starvation and fever.

Even the poorest Irish family scraped together the sixpenny passage to freedom. Packed steamboats transported as many as a thousand migrants at a time across the Irish Sea, up to the Firth of Clyde, to where the great industrial city and trading port of Glasgow awaited them. Work was plentiful for the new arrivals in its booming factories, mills and shipyards.

In the mid 1830s Jimmy Kinnon’s great-grandfather, John, came ashore here, one more link in that great green chain of Irish migration to Scotland. John Kinnon would have been sad to leave his home in rural County Cavan in North-eastern Ireland, where he had been apprenticed as a wood sawyer. During his boyhood, the county’s population was 250,000; famine would push that number below 50,000.

Soon after arriving in Glasgow, John and his wife Janet moved out to the small town of Paisley, eight miles to the west of Glasgow. Paisley was a rural area on the outskirts of teeming, slum-ridden Glasgow, famed for its wild flowers. In the 19th century, the town became world famous for its weaving industry based on the distinctive Paisley Pattern.

By the time John and thousands of his countrymen came to Paisley for work in the 1840s, the town was facing the same urban overcrowding as Glasgow, and all the social problems that go with it. The family lived in a Spartan tenement in Marshall Lane in the grimy heart of the town.

Like all good Catholic families, the newly-weds planned a big family. Two days after Christmas 1855, Janet gave birth to a their first child, James, the first of four. By the time the boy was 15, James was working in one of the giant thread mills that once dotted Paisley. Sister Christina was also working in the mills from the age of 12.

Many couples meet at work. In 1881, 26-year-old James married Catherine McCann, a fellow factory worker. Their son - another James – was born a year later at Storie Street in an upstairs tenement in the overcrowded heart of Paisley. He was to be the father of the man we have come to know as Jimmy K.

Jimmy’s dad had the easy charm and ‘gift of the gab’ that we associate with the Irish. Like his father and grandfather, he had a tough day job in local factories. But he honed his skills as a comedian and dancer, work nights in music halls and theatres.
In 1910, he met and married 23-year-old mill worker Elizabeth (Lizzie) Carrick at St Mary’s Roman Catholic Church, a splendid brownstone building that still stands today. Paisley’s single weekly NA ‘Buddies’ meeting is held in a hall on the church site in George Street.

In the spring of 1911, Elizabeth gave birth to James Jr (Jimmy) Patrick Kinnon at the family home in West Street. He would be the first of five children, four boys and a girl. James Kinnon was 24 years old when Jimmy came into the world on 5 April.

Jimmy grew up a ‘buddie’, the name given a person from Paisley. He followed in the family tradition, becoming an excellent (and very competitive) dancer when he was very young.

In later life, he spoke of the laughter and sociability of his home life in various tenements in Paisley, cramped and dark places with outside toilets. His upbringing was typical of the tight-knit communal ‘clanship’ of the Irish. Their culture is famous for its conviviality and the huge emphasis on singing, dancing and story-telling. Alcohol was, of course, as much a part of daily life as a bowl of porridge.

Home must have been a sharp contrast to the mean streets outside, where there was feuding between Catholic and Protestant, the ‘Billies and the Dans’.

In Paisley, as in nearby Glasgow, the Irish Catholic exile community always faced the same kind of persecution found in their homeland. The Irish poor were seen as the lowest of the low, living in crowded tenements and prone to diseases like typhus and cholera. According to the book, *The Irish in Scotland*:

The Irish were hardly treated like a race but rather like a rash; like a disease that had broken out upon the soil and must be suppressed…like measles.

At the time Jimmy’s father was growing up, ‘hunting the barney’ (Irishman) was a popular annual demonstration among Glasgow’s protestant natives. Those caught were clubbed and beaten. But the Irish ‘navvies’ made a big contribution to the city. In the 1890s, a huge squad of Irish labour mainly built the Glasgow Subway.

As the son of an Irishman or ‘Patlander’, Jimmy’s childhood was tough and he learned to wield his fists at an early age. *Growing up in the Gorbals*, a famous account by a young Glasgow boy in the pre-World War One era talks about ‘growing up with violence’

It simmered and bubbled and boiled over in street and close, outside the pubs, at the dance halls in Bedford Street and Ballater Street and Crown Street, sometimes in gang raids from adjacent slum areas, Kinning Park, Hutchesontown, Govanhill, Kingston. Seldom did such attacks find the defenders unprepared. Like the raiders they would be armed, with bicycle chains, knuckle-dusters, chisels, open razors or the fearsome Razor Cap – razor blades embedded in the peak of a cloth cap with their cutting edges projecting, and swung in a scything motion across an enemy’s face and neck.
The Irish were not only seen as ‘stupid and dirty’, but also as a nation of alcoholics. A famous story from Jimmy’s childhood concerns his friendship with the town drunk, a man called Crookshank. From time to time, Jimmy would find the older man sprawled in doorways, or bleeding on the street after a beating. Bob Stone relates in My Years in Narcotics Anonymous how Jimmy found Crookshank so badly injured that he took him to hospital.

Later, when Jimmy inquired of his mother when Mr Crookshank was going to come back, he was put off with the words ‘next week’ and this kept going on for some time. Finally, his mother took him to see his friend; he was in a mental institution. He was in a wheel chair, and just sat there staring but not seeing. Jimmy wanted to know what was wrong with him.

His mother responded that he was a very sick man, he drank too much, and he got hurt too much over the years. Jimmy didn’t say anything as his friend was taken away or as they walked to the trolley and went home. Finally his mother asked why he was so quiet. Jimmy responded that ‘when I grow up, I’m going to help people like Mr Crookshank.

It was a prophetic moment, one Jimmy never forgot.

In 1920, as the boy approached his tenth year, Glasgow’s economy was in decline. The wartime boom centred on shipbuilding, steel and engineering was fading, and there was talk of mass unemployment. James Kinnon family had kept food on the table during the good years, and Elizabeth had produced four more sons. But with a growing family to look after, James decided to take a giant step that would change all their lives.
2. Island of Tears

In 1921, as his first born son turned ten, James Sr booked a third class ‘steerage’ passage to America – the cheapest fare available. He decided to undertake the long and arduous Atlantic crossing journey alone – confident he could send later for Elizabeth and the little ‘Buddies’ once he had saved enough money.

The Kinnon family were taking part in a phenomenon known as ‘chain migration’, common to the millions flooding in from Europe into the United States at the time. Under the scheme, a family member who gained citizenship could send for their adult relative. In this case, James’ sister Ellen was forging another link in the chain.

From 1892 to 1954, the legendary Federal immigration station at Ellis Island was a gateway for more than twelve million immigrants seeking a new home the United States. Many of the 4.5 million Irish who entered America between 1850 and 1930 passed through what became known as the ‘Island of Tears’.

Immigration records show when James reached New York Harbour on 13 June, 1921, aboard the *SS Columbia*, Ellen was living in Tulip Street in Tacony, Philadelphia. Along with the poorest class of passenger, he had spent the long sea voyage in ‘steerage’ near the bottom of the steamship, in crowded and unsanitary conditions.

Unlike wealthy first and second-class passengers (who got automatic entry), people like James were shipped by barge to Ellis Island where they faced a battery of medical and legal checks. After a six second (!) physical examination, immigrants were asked 29 questions including name, occupation, and the amount of money they held. In 1920, no fewer than 225,206 immigrants were processed!

Most of those approved passed through Ellis Island in from three to five hours. Those with visible health problems or diseases risked being sent home or held in the island's hospital facilities for long periods of time, as one newspaper of the day reported:

> Once landed, they congregate in a waiting room, and then are separated, by sexes, only long enough for medical examination, which in the case of women is conducted by women physicians and attendants. Twenty per cent. of the steerage passengers from each vessel are stripped to detect possible vermin. Those who have passed the medical inspection successfully–almost invariably a great majority–next reassemble by families in a large hall, where they await their turn for the literacy tests. Persons with a clean sheet from the doctors who pass the literacy test–thirty to forty words from the Psalms printed in their own language–and who satisfy the legal qualifications, are at once sent on their way in groups accompanied by guides to the various railway stations.

At immigration, James stated his identity as Scottish and we can speculate that he was forewarned against the widespread prejudice against the Irish in parts of the United States. He was soon walking on American soil, and within two years, had his own place at Torresdale Ave, Tacony.
Records show that when he could, James wired money to Glasgow for his family. Emotional months must have passed as he awaited the arrival of Lizzie and his five children: 12-year old Jimmy, John, 9, Patricia, 7, Charles, 5, and Neil, the boy he had last glimpsed as a baby, now three years old.

But the money from America was not always enough, forcing Lizzie to apply to Paisley Parish for a primitive form of welfare. The ‘Poor Law’ register at the Paisley Museum show that from July 1921 to 1923, she claimed a weekly allowance and money for clothing her children. By Jan 1923, Lizzie had enough money to pay for their passage to America.

But getting there would prove to be a gruelling experience for the Kinnon family. In the sweltering midsummer of 8 August 1923, they disembarked off the SS Cameronia, a two-masted, single-funnelled steamer of 16,000 tons. In later life, Jimmy would often speak of the days that followed.

The migrant boats from Europe were known as ‘the coffin ships’. The long voyage across the turbulent Atlantic Ocean could be horrendous, and no one suffered more than passengers jammed together in steerage. Many perished in squalid, over-heated conditions.

Another Irish immigrant who arrived that year recalled the experience:

> Oh God, I was sick. Everybody was sick. I don’t even want to remember the old boat. One night I prayed to God that it would go down because the waves were washing over it. I was that sick, I didn’t care if it went down or not. And everybody else was the same way.

When Patricia, aged 7, came ashore she was extremely ill with an infectious disease. Records confirm that she was hospitalized on the island for six days, with Elizabeth by her side.

The Kinnons’ long-awaited entry to the land of dreams fast became a nightmare. There was a real risk that immigration doctors would refuse the whole family entry on health grounds – and send Elizabeth and the children back to Scotland on the next ship.

As Patricia fought for her life in quarantine, Jimmy was left on his own, in charge of his brothers. The four boys spent sleepless nights in a bunk bed in a huge hall, along with hundreds of other immigrants. A description from the time paints a grim picture:

> ‘It is dirty and filthy, and all the scum of the world seems to assemble there, no discrimination is made between the clean and the respectable or the filthy, but all are herded together in one room. During the daytime, men and women, boys, girls and infants are in the one room, 72 feet long by 24 feet wide.

> “For sleeping, the sexes are separated and 820 persons are put in the same room. The bunks are built in tiers of twelve, and it often happens that one found himself with foreigners above and below, no division being made into
nationalities or discrimination of classes. Sometimes one has to sleep on forms, because no beds were available.”

Jimmy befriended a family from Germany, also detained on the island. They offered support as the boys waited – and waited. Political refugees in their own country, the Germans also feared deportation back home and the real possibility they would be put to death. Jimmy always wondered about what happened to his kind friends.

James Sr meanwhile would have been pacing on shore, barred from contact with his family as they awaited clearance. He, too, would have spent nights without sleep, wondering what had happened to his loved ones.

Then came deliverance. Today if we look closely at the ship’s manifest (logbook), we can make out a scribble over Patricia’s name that would carry so much significance. Three little words and a date written in ink say it all: ‘Returned from hospital 8/14/23’. At last the waiting was over, and the family was free to come ashore to their new life in a new land.

The experience on the Island of Tears severely tested the faith of Jimmy Kinnon. Throughout his life, he recalled the fear of losing Patricia, the anguished days of waiting, and the flood of relief on 14 August when the family was finally granted entry to America. There must have been a celebration that night at Tacony.
3. Going West

After the anguish of Ellis Island, Jimmy would have been overjoyed to see the family reunited. His Aunt Ellen and the other members of the McCraw clan, from nearby Tulip Street, would have widened the family circle even further.

But it was soon clear that the Kinnons’ new home in Tacony in the northeast of Philadelphia, was another tough working class neighborhood, not that different from the mean streets of Paisley. Located on the banks of the Delaware, Tacony was heavily industrialized by 1920, with great steel plants and textile factories.

A beacon in the town was the Tacony Music Hall, a three-storey brick building that still stands. Built in 1885, it is remembered as social and recreational hub, a place that regularly hosted musical revues and variety shows. We can only speculate whether James performed there in vaudeville, perhaps with the ‘Irish comicalities’, known to be regular performers there.

As in Glasgow, the Irish Catholics with their tight-knit culture were seen outsiders, not blending well into a frontier society. Critics scapegoated poor Irish crowded into basements as carriers of disease like cholera. Shantytowns were known as ‘Irishtowns’ and newspaper cartoons showed ‘Paddy’ as a ‘dim-witted ape-like man given to idleness and drink’. One politician went further: ‘our Celtic fellow citizens are almost as remote from us in temperament and constitution as the Chinese.’

Once again Jimmy’s Irish heritage was proving to be a liability. In later life, he talked of being ‘a fighter, both literally and figuratively’, while growing up in Tacony. He was also drawn more closely to the Catholic Church during these years. Irish priests in particular wielded enormous power in their local community, helping glue it together. One writer has talked of the Church’s enduring impact on America:

The Irish helped invent the parish as a quasi-political unit, a network of like-minded people, a community unto itself, enclosed by a wall designed to keep out hostile forces and preserve the faith and devotion of those within.

Jimmy’s parents enrolled him at a theological seminary at nearby Germantown, with hopes of him eventually entering the Catholic priesthood. We don’t know how long he lasted. But the prospect of six rigorous years of mental and moral training ‘in retirement from the world’ would have been daunting. Training to become an ‘ambassador for Christ’ also involved rising for meditation at 5am, and retreats, up to ten days long, every year.

Trainee priests did, however, enjoy one reward for all this effort: alcohol. Generous amounts of it were available at Germantown, and it was here that the first signs of Jimmy’s addiction became apparent. He was soon a dedicated drinker. Over the next ten years, he would switch to other drugs as his addiction became full-blown.

Jimmy returned home and embarked on a career as a roofer and painter. But this rugged workingman also showed a reflective side in an appreciation of poetry. He patiently typed out the works of his countryman Oscar Wilde, and poems by Rudyard Kipling, Omar Khayyam, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Henry David Thoreau.
One particular favourite was Wilde’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a plea for prison reform written while the poet was serving a two-year sentence there.

We were as men who through a fen
of filthy darkness grope:
We did not dare to breathe a prayer,
Or to give our anguish scope:
Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was Hope.

We know he began writing philosophical verses of his own during the 1930s, gaining increasing confidence as he went.

Sometime in the early 1940s; the exact date is unclear, Jimmy left Pennsylvania and headed out to California, where cities like Los Angeles were booming and jobs were plentiful. We can only speculate that he was keen to break away from the cloistered family structures back home.

And there, in the sun-splashed San Fernando Valley, he married his wife Betty, fathered three boys and three girls, living in a little house just across the road from Lockheed airport (later called Burbank), a major airport for Los Angeles.

Jimmy was experiencing the joy of creating a family of his own. But did he come to miss the geographical separation from the East Coast Kinnons? The challenges for the Californian Irish have been eloquently expressed:

Out west, the Irish who went to the frontier often wrote of their loneliness and disorientation they experienced amid the wide open spaces other settlers seemed to thrive on. For better or for worse, rugged individualism wasn’t in the Irish character, or aspiration.

He worked hard to support his family. Nearly every day, he earned good money hammering roofs onto houses in the suburbs. But illegal drugs were catching up with him. His life as an addict was becoming unmanageable. A series of arrests in the late 1940s led him to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in North Hollywood. The date was 2 February, 1950.

Jimmy struggled to embrace the new ideas he heard in AA, itself barely a decade old. Like many others, he found the ‘God part’ especially challenging. He’d long since severed ties with formal religion. He blamed everyone, God included, for the endless persecution and violence that had blighted his life. But Jimmy kept attending AA meetings and tried to stay sober and clean.

One day, after 18 months of continuous abstinence, he had a classic ‘white light’ religious experience. The episode began with an anxiety attack that confined him to his bedroom for three days. Unable to speak, he just sat there blankly. From time to time Betty would enter the room and try to help, but Jimmy was gripped by fear. He had found no Higher Power that could be relied on, and he had long spurned organised religion. He told this story in 1982:
On the third night, I had been asleep for a while and awoke in abject terror, but didn’t know what was wrong. I was afraid but my fear seemed to have no object. I felt paralysed; couldn’t move; was unable to scream or ask for help. It was then I saw a great round glow of light ahead of him. It looked like ‘a great big orange disk of hammered silver with a large post on either side and a caduceus around them and some steps. I recalled my fears about rejecting religion and felt ‘they were going to get me’. And a voice out of nowhere said ‘don’t be afraid’. For an instant the fear continued, then the fear passed and I wasn’t afraid.

And the voice told me what to do. I said couldn’t do that. But the voice spoke again and struck away the mental shield I was trying to hide behind. The voice knew me too well. This was my first ever Higher Power. And for the next 24 hours I knew complete and absolute serenity. The NA programme came, in part, as a result of that experience. I knew that everything was going to be alright, and that if he would just follow directions according to my conscience, things would work out. I felt that I’d made contact with some inner part of myself and the entire universe, and that was the Higher Power.
4. Inheritors of a Dream

The rest of Jimmy Kinnon’s life might be described as an open book. So much has been written on that first landmark ‘Dad’s Club’ meeting on 5 October 1953 in the San Fernando Valley, where he and 16 addicts seeking recovery gathered together.

The fierce personality conflicts that arose in those early years have been recorded. We recoil as we realise that NA came close to dying out altogether in the late 1950s until Jimmy realised that adapting AA’s Twelve Traditions would ensure its survival.

We know, too, of Jimmy’s contributions as a writer; the way he coined a practical and simple language for recovery, notably in the Little White Book and other foundation literature. We know of the way he was the World Service Office for so many of the early years, tirelessly answering phone calls and mailing out literature around the world from his front room.

We know less about the family man; the philosopher; the invalid. Little has been written about Jimmy’s battle from the late 1960s with the debilitating illness tuberculosis. In 1968, aged 57, he began a four year spell of hospitalisation and enforced home rest. It was during this time that he designed the NA logo.

By the mid 1970s, NA was flourishing. What was once a ‘Dad’s Club’ dream was becoming a reality, as meetings sprang up across the USA – and in countries around the world. The explosion in drug use brought in a new generation of vigorous and assertive addicts. These were people keen to get things done; to complete outstanding tasks like the writing of NA’s Basic Text.

The old guard from Sun Valley were threatened and a not little defensive. The squabbles over the writing of the ‘Blue Book’ – once seen as Jimmy’s ‘pet project’ – showed a group of tough old street fighters struggling to let go. These difficult years were also a powerful reminder that the NA torch was being snatched up by a new and passionate generation. Most of all, they brought home the intense humanity and fallibility of those founders.

By 1980, Jimmy was approaching 70, and his health was giving out. His twilight years were weighed down by too many hospitalisations and invasive operations. But he was there on April 1983, when the first edition of the Basic Text rolled off the printing press, placing boxes in the back of his old pick-up truck. And he was there to close the 1984 World Convention with a prayer, and to greet the news that 38,000 copies of the book had already been sold.

Jimmy’s final years are touched with tragedy and pathos, as NA readied to become a truly global fellowship. The change of guard in the management of the bustling World Service Office upset and bewildered him. But Jimmy must have known deep down he had succeeded in all his struggles.

His dream of recovery had come to pass; he and the Dad’s Club originals had truly built a fellowship where addicts could stay clean. As his son, Dick Kinnon said at his funeral, on a shimmering Los Angeles day in June 1985, ‘Dad was a fighter’.
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