

Temporary exhibition
Bad Bridget, Ulster American
Folk Park, Omagh

The stories of ‘Bad Bridgets’ who left Ireland for North America in search of a better life are told with compassion, writes *Margaret Middleton*

Crossing continents

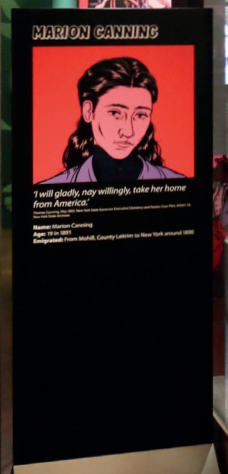
With a saturated colour palette and a focus on poor emigrant women who often found themselves on the wrong side of the law, Bad Bridget lets visitors know loud and clear she is not like other exhibitions.

The gallery stands in stark contrast to the more traditional permanent displays at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh, Northern Ireland. Opened in April last year and inspired by a research project of the same name, Bad Bridget interprets the lives of women who left Ireland between 1838 and 1918 and were drawn to North America by the

promise of economic opportunity. The stories of women in history museums are rare and the stories of poor women are even rarer. With few authentic objects and complete records to draw from, the exhibition team had to get creative with imaginative techniques including composite narratives, sensory experiences and illustration to tell these often-overlooked stories. The focus on marginalised subjects paired with such dynamic design marks an exciting departure for the museum.

An example of reflexive practice, this exhibition about

Right: with few artefacts, the museum uses imaginative techniques to recreate women's experiences



Left: some women took samples of their needlework to impress prospective employers in America

marginalised women was developed in the feminist spirit of collaboration, primarily through a close partnership with Queen's University researchers Elaine Farrell and Leanne McCormick. They titled their project after the collective name, often derogatory, for Irish women servants working in America and their dalliances with the law. This emphasis on “bad behaviour” has much to do with the fact that surviving documentation

of the lives of the poor are often relegated to their interactions with the state, such as immigration and criminal records.

One upside to this bias is that the scrappiness and naughtiness of these stories, combined with the young age of many of the “Bridgets”, has had the potential to appeal to a younger demographic that the Folk Park – and many other heritage sites – typically struggles to attract. Evaluation has shown that



the exhibition has indeed attracted this younger audience and has surpassed expected numbers.

In addition to this collaboration, key elements of the exhibition were commissioned from women creative professionals, including artist Fiona McDonnell, author Jan Carson, and artist and food historian Tasha Marks. Together, their imaginative interpretations bring to life the stories of marginalised

women whose lives were not historicised the way their wealthy male counterparts have been.

Though it represents a new direction, Bad Bridget follows the larger westward momentum of the living history site, which features historic buildings and costumed interpreters who guide visitors on a journey from the “Old World” in Ireland to the “New World” in North America. Echoing this journey, the temporary



Left: a potato and ration coupons give a stark reminder of the economic pressures in Ireland during the Great Famine, when many girls and women chose to emigrate in the 1840s in hope of a better life

exhibition begins in Ireland, then takes the arduous trip across the sea, and ends in the cities of New York, Boston and Toronto. Each section is splashed with the colour of McDonnell's bright illustrations that stretch from floor to ceiling, defying the black and white filter through which we usually see 19th-century life depicted.

The women pictured in these drawings are not idealised feminine archetypes, but old women ▶

A scent sample station recreates the smells of a seaside carnival



in patched clothes, mothers with tired eyes and teens with mischievous smirks. Object displays show restraint, using a few symbolic objects to represent the lives of women whose belongings were never preserved. Some object choices are literal, such as an advertisement for the White Star Line and a pocket Bible like the ones many emigrants brought on their journey across the ocean. Others are more impressionistic, such as a corset to illustrate the story of a sex worker, and a pencil drawing of a dancing girl, symbolising comforting childhood memories.

Along the way are scents to sample, custom-blended by Marks to evoke site-specific memories such as the smoky turf fire of an Irish cottage, the stench of steerage, and the sweetness of a day at a seaside carnival.

Considering context

Across the exhibition space, Carson's labels inhabit a collective voice for the Bridgets, speaking in first person plural to the visitors, a first for the museum. Earphone stations invite visitors to listen to short audio stories of individual women, first person

narratives inspired by the lives of real Irish emigrants and imagined by Carson.

As more museums make a point of telling women's stories, it is important to recognise the wide variety of experiences of women of the past and the women who will visit the museum today. *Bad Bridget* addresses themes of sexual assault, rape and sex work in nuanced, compassionate ways. I would have liked to see that same level of care given to issues of colonisation, race, gender and sexuality.

The context of an impoverished Ireland and a wealthy America are described vaguely as "circumstances", a missed opportunity to discuss the coercive economic dynamics that influenced Irish emigration.

A video interview between interpretation writer Carson and fellow author Kia Corthran adds a fascinating racial dimension to the immigrant story, but is not well integrated.

Abortion services are conspicuously missing from an otherwise thoughtful panel at the end of the



Margaret Middleton is an independent exhibition designer and museum consultant in Belfast

exhibition listing contact information for local organisations, including Alcoholics Anonymous and Rape Crisis Northern Ireland. Queer and trans women are not mentioned in the exhibit. Given the difficulty so many face in accessing gender-affirming care, abortion care and immigration services in Northern Ireland and across the UK, these would have been topics that visitors would find meaningful.

Visitor views

At the end of the exhibition, visitors are invited to share their thoughts and feelings on cards. On my visit I read many feedback cards emphatically declaring *Bridget* not so bad after all. I took this as proof of the efficacy of the narrative reframing of the outlaw *Bridget* as a woman at the margins who is criminalised due to poverty and discrimination.

As well as visiting the *Bad Bridget* exhibition, you can learn more about the lives of the women and girls of the *Bad Bridget* project in the researchers' book and podcast of the same name.

Project data

Cost £76,275

Main funders

Arts and Humanities Research Council; National Museums NI; Queen's University; Ulster University

AV, conservation, curation and exhibition build

National Museums NI

Copywriting

Jan Carson

Graphic design, 3D design and mount-making

Redman Design

Graphic production

CW Graphics

Illustration

Fiona McDonnell/Usfolk

Music and soundscape

Catriona Gribben and Franziska Schroeder

Scents

AVM Curiosities

Exhibition ends

26 April 2024

Admission Free entry for

Museums Association

members