

Ireland's Silences: the Magdalene Laundries

By Nathalie Sebbane

Thanks to the success of Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters*, Magdalene laundries—institutions meant to punish Ireland's "fallen" women—are now part of the country's collective memory. Despite tremendous social advances, survivors still await reparation and an official apology.

In 2016, the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising was commemorated with great fanfare, but another anniversary went almost unnoticed. Yet it was on September 25, 1996, that Ireland's last remaining Magdalene laundry closed its doors. These institutions, made infamous by Peter Mullan's 2003 feature film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, are now part of Ireland's collective memory. But what memory is this? And what Ireland does it relate to?

It is estimated that since the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, around 10,000 girls and women were referred to these institutions, staying there from a month up to several decades. Magdalene laundries however, had been in existence in Ireland since the 18th century under other guises and other names. Their origin can even be traced to 13th-century Italy.

Yet at a time when Ireland is looking to redefine its national identity and fully embrace modernity with the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015 and the repeal of the 8th amendment on abortion on May 25, 2018, it seems relevant to commemorate the closure of the last laundry and revisit the history of Magdalene laundries. Though they were not an Irish invention strictly speaking, they remain one of the key elements of what historian James Smith has called "Ireland's architecture of containment"—a system which erases vulnerable groups destined to 'disappear' in Irish society, whether in Magdalene laundries, Industrial Schools or Mother and Baby Homes. The latter have come under fire over the past few years after the remains of several hundred babies and infants were found on the Tuam site.

How did this system, which did not originate in Ireland, become one of the pillars of moral order in the newly independent Irish Free State? Why was it only in the 1990s that the veil of silence was finally lifted, shaking the country to its core with various revelations and scandals? And how can the memory of the institutions and of the survivors' experiences be prevented from falling into oblivion?

Prostitutes and “fallen women”: from Magdalene Asylums to Magdalene Laundries

The first convent-operated institutions meant to welcome and reform “fallen” women originated in 13th-century Italy. In 1257, a group of women known as the “repentents” of Saint Maria-Magdalena the Penitent settled in Florence. After the Council of Trent (1545-1563), a vast network of institutions specialising in the care of women developed throughout the country, and convents (*monasteri*) were established for prostitutes wishing to do penance. Within these convents, women led a secluded life, focused on redeeming their sins. In the 16th and 17th centuries, new institutions geared towards the protection of prostitutes and girls deemed vulnerable flourished throughout Catholic Europe.

For Catholic reformers before and after the Council of Trent, Mary Magdalene was an ideal symbol. She epitomised both the Church's moral regeneration, and the believer's ability to embrace his or her newfound faith. Prostitutes were expected to follow this path. Mary-Magdalene also symbolised renewed piety and religious fervour within the lay community, as she enabled philanthropists to engage in charity endeavours. She brought redemption to societies which had for too long turned a blind eye upon the practice of prostitution, and which still upheld the double standard of sexual morality. These standards meant that women alone were considered guilty sinners, whereas their clients were never targeted.

Eighteenth-century English philanthropists had come to the exact same conclusion when they founded the London *Lock Hospital* in 1746. The institution was meant to cure women—generally prostitutes—suffering from venereal diseases. The Magdalene Hospital opened its doors in London in 1758. The two founders, Robert Dingley and Jonas Hanway, were rich merchants who, having travelled across Europe, drew inspiration from Catholic asylums and adapted these institutions to their own, Protestant ethics. Another Protestant philanthropist, Lady Arabella Denny, took cues from her visit to the Dublin Foundling Hospital and founded Ireland's first Magdalene Asylum in 1767. The institution catered for unwed mothers and other vulnerable females. Similar institutions were established in great numbers throughout the country between the mid-18th- and the mid-19th century, usually by lay philanthropists.

It was only in the mid-19th century that Catholic women's orders took over these institutions, thus establishing laundry and needlework as their main source of income. On the contrary, Protestant asylums were funded through private donations, usually granted during church service. After a few years, according to Irish historian Maria Luddy, philanthropists lost interest in these asylums, hence a slew of financial difficulty. From then on, a new ideology would prevail, one based both on stricter Catholic moral codes and on the fear of Protestant proselytism. Over the 19th century, Magdalene Asylums morphed into punitive establishments, where institutionalisation followed a quasi-totalitarian pattern. Duration of stay increased, and vocational training with a view to social rehabilitation was superseded by

a policy of systematic hard labour, with the intention to fund the institution. The harshness of laundry work came to epitomise the process of moral and physical purification that the women had to perform to repent. The word “asylum” was accordingly replaced by “laundry”. The women were expected to literally wash away their sins, just like Mary-Magdalene had washed Jesus’s feet.

Four women’s religious orders—the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd—now ruled over the many Magdalene laundries scattered all over Ireland (in Dublin, Galway, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, New Ross, Tralee and Belfast). Each convent had its own laundry, and often its own Industrial School and/or Mother and Baby Home. Everything was in place for ‘Magdalenism’ to play out on an unprecedented scale.

The “Magdalen” regime

Few studies and scholarly articles dealing with Magdalene laundries have pointed out the many similarities between the nuns and “fallen” women living under the same roof within these institutions. From the 1920s to the 1990s, Irish women were defined by the nature of their sexual activity, hence four dominant stereotypes—the nun, the mother, the old maid and the fallen woman.¹ Yet just like fallen women, nuns lived an isolated life on the margins of society. Within their exclusively female communities, secluded in convents, they were cut off from the outside world. Fallen women were likewise considered to have willingly isolated themselves, this time by having committed sins of the flesh. They were thus forced to live without any contact with the outside world, so that the stigmata of their sins would remain hidden from society’s view. Beyond its moral and religious dimension, the Magdalenist regime was fraught with class prejudice, as most women held against their will in the laundries were from a deprived social background—a reminder that poverty was associated with immorality. Moreover, both the nuns and the Magdalenes were refused the right to express their own personality and sexuality. Consequently, the physical and moral contact that existed between these two antagonistic categories of women, inevitably led to regular confrontation.

Upon entering a Madgalene laundry, girls and women were given a new name—that of a saint—as a first step towards erasing their pasts and paving the road to redemption. Their hair was cut against the sin of vanity. They were compelled to wear drab outfits to erase all signs of femininity. Days were an exhausting mix of prayer, hard work and imposed silence. As the laundries were privately run, they were not officially funded by the state. However, it was proved in 2013 by the McAleese Commission that the state indirectly contributed to the institutions’ financial support, as hospitals, barracks and other public services outsourced their laundry to the Magdalenes. The resident’s labour was the only source of income, though the women worked without pay. Some women only spent a short time in the laundries, to be later welcomed back by their families; others entered domestic service, and others simply ran

¹ From the early days of the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, political, societal and family life were dominated by the doctrine of Catholic social teaching. In 1937, the Constitution of the future Republic of Ireland (est. 1948) took in and absorbed this doctrine, thereby laying the foundations of a patriarchal society where women were confined to the private sphere, thus fulfilling their expected role as wives and mothers. Irish political circles, essentially male-dominated and conservative, never ran the risk of questioning this model.

away. But many lived in the laundries for years, abandoned by their relatives and forgotten by society at large.²

Scandals and revelations. Excavating the past

In the 1990s, Ireland was rocked by a series of scandals that shook one of its pillars, the Catholic Church. Priests, bishops and monks—most notably members of the Christian Brothers, who ran the whole network of boys’ schools and Industrial schools—were said to have physically and sexually abused hundreds of children. As testimonies piled up, shocking documentaries were aired on television, especially *Dear Daughter* (1996), *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1996) and *States of Fear* (1999). Ireland thus uncovered a dark side of its history. As many began to speak out, commissions of investigation were established, followed by damning reports. Whereas autobiographies denouncing abuse within Industrial Schools had been published as early as the 1980s,³ the silence surrounding Magdalene laundries remained deafening. The women who managed to leave the institution tried and rebuild their lives, often moving to England. Wishing to forget and to hide the shame they still felt, they hid their stories from their families and did their utmost to keep their secret. The economic boom of the 1990s undoubtedly contributed to Ireland’s secularisation process, thus encouraging people to speak out.

In 1993, another scandal was uncovered regarding property dealings carried out by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge. It was revealed that on the site of one of Dublin’s most extensive Magdalene laundries, in High Park, Drumcondra, dozens of women had been buried in unmarked graves, many without any death certificates being issued. In order to accelerate the selling of the land, the Sisters obtained an exhumation licence, and sought to cremate the remains, which were later reburied at Glasnevin Cemetery, also in Dublin. The whole operation was carried out without any real inquiry into its legal status. Yet some reporters and a few of the women’s relatives would not let it all go unnoticed. The Magdalene Memorial Committee was set up, campaigning for a memorial to be built for the women, once forgotten while still alive, and now anonymous in death. In 1996, a plaque on a bench at Stephen’s Green Park, Dublin, was unveiled by President Mary Robinson.

A few years later, the committee turned into an advocacy support group for the women now called ‘survivors’. [*Justice for Magdalenes*](#) (JFM) then launched a successful political campaign from 2009 to 2013. Not only did then-*Taoiseach* Enda Kenny give an official apology but in 2011, a commission of inquiry was established under the chairmanship of senator Martin McAleese, to investigate the State’s involvement with the operation of the Magdalene laundries. The Commission heard testimonies from many survivors, nuns and civil servants, before publishing its Report in 2013. It was a huge blow for the Irish State. Contrary to what the public had been led to believe for years, the Church was not solely accountable for the forced imprisonment of thousands of women. The judiciary, the police and health services had all referred women to the Magdalene laundries, thus forsaking entirely their duty to care

² According to the McAleese Commission, women were held in laundries for a duration of 7 months in average. Between 1922 and 1996, less than 35.6% of inmates were held for less than 3 months, while 92.3% stayed for less than 10 years. These figures are contested by survivors’ support groups, most notably Justice for Magdalenes.

³ Gerard Mannix Flynn, *Nothing to Say*, Dublin, Ward River Press, 1983; Paddy Doyle, *The God Squad*, London, Corgi, 1989.

for vulnerable people. It also transpired that many children went directly from Industrial Schools to Magdalene laundries. Likewise, women who had given birth out of wedlock in Mother and Baby Homes would later be sent to the laundries, thus being condemned to a lifetime of institutionalisation.

Even so, most of the 10,000 or so Magdalenes were sent to the laundries by their own families with the help of a priest. A figure of moral authority, the parish priest would recommend that the so-called “fallen” girl be sent to a laundry to avoid all matter of scandal and protect the honour of the family. It was not unheard of for some girls to be sent away simply because they were deemed too pretty, and thus at risk of “falling”. Some women went there voluntarily, for want of other alternatives, as there was no other institution geared towards unmarried mothers or girls with a tainted reputation.⁴ Now that the State had admitted its collusion with the Magdalene laundries, it had to take action to officially acknowledge the survivors’ trauma, and to enable a process of transitional justice.

Transitional justice, promises and stalling tactics

Survivors’ support groups met the McAleese Report with a great deal of reservation, given that the committee of inquiry overlooked the thousands of pages of testimonies that it had been sent. As a result, the Report’s figures vastly understate the reality of the situation. Justice John Quirke was then appointed to oversee a process of transitional justice. He recommended the creation of a discretionary compensation scheme, so that all women would receive lump sum payments. He also called for a medical card granting free access to most health services to be given to survivors, access to mental health support, payment equivalent to a state pension and finally, the creation of a memorial garden to commemorate the Magdalenes. It should be recalled that these women worked for years, if not decades, without pay. Furthermore, as they never contributed to any pension plan whatsoever, they do not exist in the eyes of the State, and are therefore ineligible for state support in principle. This amounts to a life on the margins of society.

To this day, the Irish government has hardly honoured its promises, and many survivors are yet to access the services they need. When accepting to receive the lump sum they are entitled to, they also pledged not to take the Irish state to court. The health card given to them is highly insufficient, and does not cover the specific needs of these women who were denied proper medical care for many years. Moreover, some women were refused compensation because they were not officially registered with one of the twelve laundries covered by the scheme. Meanwhile, Justice for the Magdalenes has been working for years to have the Magdalene laundries system recognised as an infringement on human rights.

The issue of human rights

As early as 2010, Justice for Magdalenes filed a request to the Irish Human Rights Committee (IHRC) to call for an inquiry on historic abuse in the Magdalene laundries. In its

⁴ Adoption was only legalised in 1953.

universal periodic review of July 2011 and February 2016, the United Nations Committee Against Torture (UNCAT) twice ruled on Magdalene laundries at JCM's behest. The experts deplored that the Irish government did not conduct a proper independent inquiry on the institutions and their abused inmates, to the point that no one was either questioned or prosecuted.

This remains a major sore point today. Contrary to other transitional justice schemes, like the ones carried out in Northern Ireland or South Africa, abusers have not been put on trial, and survivors have had no means to confront directly those who enabled, encouraged and took part in the system. The McAleese Commission's remit was very narrow, and deliberately so. Evidence from the nuns was taken under a seal of secrecy. Registers and other laundry archives were examined by the Commission, but then given back to the congregations, thus cutting short the research work necessary to pinpoint responsibility. Access to the archives must be granted to academics, survivors and their families.⁵ A duty to remember is at stake here.

Memory endangered

Though recommended by Justice Quirke, the creation of a memorial garden has yet to materialise, and no real steps have been taken for the project to come through in the near future. On the other hand, it seems that an insidious “de-memorialisation” process is actually underway.

In December 2017, the press revealed that Ireland's last remaining laundry—which operated on Sean McDermott Street, Dublin, until 1996—was about to be sold to a Japanese property developer for the not inconsequential sum of 14.5 million euros. The new owners plan to convert the former laundry into a hotel as part of the low-cost chain *Tokyo*ko, a company which, in a cruel twist of irony, employs underpaid female staff. The announcement caused outrage among Magdalenes support groups and some members of Dublin City Council. The site was originally meant to be preserved as a museum and memorial. At the moment, the developers have promised to include a memorial in their project, but no one knows which form this will take.

Attempts to digitise survivors' accounts are underway, but progress is slow due to lack of funds, as the work is mostly being carried out on a voluntary basis.⁶ For its part, the Irish government still shows no inclination to open congregational archives to the public. This is indeed a thorn in the side of researchers and historians, the very people who could act as guardians of the Magdalenes' memory. Their voices are increasingly fading away with every survivors' passing, and their stories risk being forgotten once again. Keeping that memory and history alive is sorely needed, and that includes ensuring that this page of national history will officially be passed on to the next generation. Failure to do so may result in the Ireland of

⁵ In March 2016, Claire McGettrick from Justice for Magdalenes sent a Freedom of Information request to *Taoiseach* Leo Varadkar, asking access to the McAleese Commission documents held by his ministry. Her request was refused twice. The United Nations Committee Against Torture also asked the Irish government to facilitate access to Magdalene laundries archives for survivors and their representatives (CAT/C/SR.1565 and CAT/C/SR.1566).

⁶ *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History; The Magdalene Names Project (JFMR); The Waterford Memories Project.*

modernity—that of the Celtic Tiger, digital industry multinational and grassroots movements standing up for same-sex marriage and the repeal of the 8th amendment—entirely forsaking some of the darkest hours in its past.

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