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## Cruelty hidden in plain view.

***The Arts: Boston-based academic James M Smith needed the distance of living abroad to write his new book about the Irish women who suffered incarceration in the Magdalen laundries. And it's a subject that 'is not finished business', he tells Gemma Tipton***

ANGER AND OUTRAGE are not necessarily emotions one would expect from a literary critic, but Boston-based academic James M Smith has struggled to come to terms with both while working on his new book, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*.

The book is not, he tells me, one he would have written had he remained in his native country. Born in Sligo and educated at UCD, Smith left what he describes as "pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland" for the US, along with 14 of his graduating class. Turning to Irish Studies and a position at Boston College, Smith finds himself in that peculiar situation whereby the Ireland he now visits is a different country from the one he left, while the students he teaches reimagining, or perhaps even searching for, something else yet again.

While Irish Studies departments differ across the US, there is a sense in which the Ireland America seems to want to remember is the one contemporary Ireland would prefer to forget.

"While, historically, there would be a nostalgia and a sentimental view of Ireland within aspects of the Irish-American community," Smith argues. "That's not true within academia. I'd have no truck with a sentimentalised, 'green' view of Irish Studies.

"My job is to complicate the view of typically Irish-American students, who are looking to purchase a sense of greenness, a sentimental, nostalgic, family-driven narrative. That's fine, and I respect that need, but people in Ireland have a very different reality."

Neither view of Ireland, however, would seem to accommodate easily a country where, until recently, women were incarcerated, often against their will, simply for not fitting into the view post-independence Ireland had created of itself. These women included, according to Smith, "unmarried mothers, the sexually promiscuous, the socially transgressive, and those merely guilty of being in the way".

It is the perspective of distance that has allowed these things to come into focus for Smith. "In this project, and in the rest of my work, I'm re-educating myself to think differently about the contexts that raised me," he says. "One of the things I say when asked why I wrote this book is that I had to leave Ireland and got America to hear the term 'Magdalen laundry'."

Before Peter Mullan's film, *The Magdalen Sisters*, brought the Magdalen laundries into the public eye of popular culture in 2002, they were one of those Irish open secrets, hiding in plain sight. I remember a walking tour of Dublin's north inner city with local historian Terry Faganin 1999. We stopped at a high blank wall on Gloucester Street. Behind that wall a Magdalen laundry had operated until 1996. I had vaguely heard the term "Magdalens" before, but had never connected it with such a recent reality or even paused to allow my imagination to investigate what such an institution had meant to the women incarcerated there, or what it said about the society in which it persisted.

Smith took a similar walk, in Galway last summer. He was visiting Patricia Burke Brogan, the former novice nun, whose play, *Eclipsed*, is based on her own experiences of working in a Magdalen laundry.

"She brought me down to Foster Street," he recalls, "where the old Magdalen was. It has been torn down and replaced with a bank, a symbol of the very commerce-orientated Irish economy and culture. Across the road is the brand-spanking-new glass Bord Fáilte building, and on the other side of the triangle is St Patrick's Church. You have to walk through that triangle of those forces - church, State and the economy - then you pass a set of new condominiums and you come to an eight-foot wall, and you just see the shards of glass across the top . . ."

Beyond this wall lies a bungalow, where there are 13 apartments, nine of which are still occupied by former Magdalens from the Galway laundry, which closed in 1990.

"And you think that's all you have to see," Smith adds. "But then you turn around and there's a little patch of green grass and, against the wall, so you cannot see from the street, are a series of six black marble headstones, with 72 names of former consecrated Magdalens, those who died with the order, and their names are still hidden from public view."

While Smith is describing here how architecture conceals both the lives and the memory of the Magdalen women, the "architecture" he refers to in the title of his book is primarily the social architecture, the construction of a society in which church, State and individuals colluded to lock women away and, in many cases, to keep them locked away for life. He tells me of his three sisters, eight aunts, and large group of female first cousins.

"It beggars belief," he says, "that any one of those women could have fallen victim to these machinations of a patriarchal, hegemonic, church-State collusion, not so very long ago." Nonetheless, he adds, "you have to work through your anger to achieve academic objectivity. That doesn't mean you can't be passionate - I am passionate about it - but it's all very carefully documented. I wasn't prepared to wait around for the history in order to tell this story."

The history he is talking about is the "official history", as told in the records of the laundries themselves, but these records are only available until the end of the 19th century.

THE FIRST MAGDALEN in Dublin opened in 1767, on Leeson Street, as a Church of Ireland institution, in what is now known as Denny House, and the laundries then operated throughout the 19th century as typically Victorian organisations, focused on rehabilitating women and putting them into positions of employment, usually domestic. But with the foundation of the State in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis shifted from social rehabilitation to spiritual salvation, and the role of the Magdalens evolved into something more disturbing.

Smith describes the Ireland that came into being in 1922 as one that reinvented itself. Part of the way it sold itself to the world used Catholicism as an agent of distinction.

"We were," he says, "rural, Catholic and, crucially, morally pure. But when you invest so heavily in that story, what do you do with the material contradiction? We chose to 'disappear' those women, because their existence contradicted that story we were telling about ourselves."

While the religious orders that ran the Magdalens will not release their records, State archives are available to historians. "The book cannot offer a history of women in the Magdalen since 1900," notes Smith, "but it does include a history of the State's involvement, and the State's collusion and complicity."

"I'm not an apologist for the religious order," he adds, "but they were the only people in society offering a solution. And part of the contract they offered these women was the promise of secrecy, of anonymity. They promised these women not to render them as spectacles in the media, and I respect that. That's why I don't use first names in the chapter on infanticide."

But the religious orders "are not the only ones who have to apologise. Each of these women had a family, distant or immediate. They had neighbours. If they were in there because of sexual activity, there was the man involved . . . but women went in for many reasons. The families have to apologise. And the State. That is the very key point here. Irish society needs to own this, and a little plaque in St Stephen's Green just doesn't cut it, frankly."

As we talk, Smith's anger at both the history of the Magdalens since the 1920s, and our contemporary amnesia, grows palpable.

"I want to know from the Minister for Justice why the State was sending women to the Magdalen who were found guilty of infanticide." he says. "Or who were on remand from the court. Did they go back and find out if the women were released at the end of their period of detention? It was much more difficult to get out of the Magdalen than it was to get in. The State preferred to have marginalised or sexually distinct women in a Magdalen rather than a women's prison, because in a women's prison it's a statistic, and the State didn't want to have statistics on rape, infanticide, incest, in the 1920s and 1930s."

WRITTEN IN AN academic style (fully annotated and footnoted), Ireland's Magdalen Laundries adds a vital strand to the emerging narratives of the laundries. In addition to carefully documenting available material from State archives, Smith also explores contemporary cultural representations of the laundries, from the film, *The Magdalen Sisters*, to art projects, such as those by Diane Fenster and Gerard Mannix Flynn, whose Far Cry Productions has brought Smith to Limerick for a lecture on the book.

The site of Flynn's Call Me By My Name project, which appeared on Leeson Street in 2004, during Ireland's presidency of the European Union, was particularly apt in that it was "down the road from Iveagh House, but also from Denny House and a whole range of lap-dancing clubs, where the contemporary population of women that Irish society is prepared to exploit are working".

The open-ended nature of the art projects appeals to Smith, facing the challenge, as he describes it of "how to commemorate without closure, how to effect a monument without fetishisation".

He nonetheless has problems with Peter Mullan's film, which, he points out, "comes to an end effecting a gap between Ireland past, so we can leave the theatre and pat ourselves on the back because we've come a long way since then . . . It purchased a currency for the discussion, but it also closed down the past."

And this is the key issue: it is not in the past.

"In 2008, as I sit here," says Smith, "there are survivors for whom the past is not being forgotten, and the past has not been acknowledged. There are women who got out, or escaped, who still can't talk about it. There are women in graves around Ireland without a name over their head, or we don't know if the name over their head is the right name. There are women so institutionalised that they are still in the care of religious orders. And there are adopted children who cannot discover their mothers' identities. This is not finished business."

On this trip, as with others, Smith will also visit his hometown of Sligo, where he finds an Ireland that has changed, "changed utterly, but still very familiar". He brings his wife, Beatriz, who is Cuban, and his daughter, Isabel, to discover at least part of the world he grew up in. The separation from his birthplace doesn't give him "the license to be an

authority", he says, but it does give him a distance from which he can approach things. "It's part of the reason why I think I could only write this book having been in the States. I think my parents are very proud of me. I hope they are, they're wonderful people. Though I'm sure they'd have loved if I'd done a book on Paddy Kavanagh . . . But they realise this is what I chose to do."

*Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, by James M Smith, is published by Manchester University Press