IRELAND'S MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES AND THE NATION'S ARCHITECTURE OF CONTAINMENT

JAMES M. SMITH

University of Notre Dame Press Notre Dame, Indiana
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CHAPTER 1

The Magdalen in Nineteenth-Century Ireland

There is no branch of state service for which religious communities are more especially fitted, and in which they succeed more notably, than in the rescue of fallen women.

Mary Costello, “The Sisterhood of Sorrow. No. II.—The Magdalens,” 15 March 1897

Writing just three years before the dawn of the twentieth century, Mary Costello explicitly links the work of religious congregations that operate Magdalen asylums with “state service.” She explains that the nuns’ task requires that they accept “one, two, or three hundred souls,” women from the lowest fields of “licence,” “pleasure-craving temperaments,” and “confirmed inebriates,” and offer them “a spiritual hospital” in which to repent their sinful ways and seek spiritual salvation. Entry to the asylum requires that the penitent women “abjure” their former habits and lead lives of “virtue,” “sobriety,” and “restraint.” They must be prepared to “look upon the joys of this world as at an end” and spend their “remaining days in works of usefulness and abnegation.” And, Costello underscores, the women must enter the asylum
voluntarily, for the “Sisters have no legal control,” and the women remain “free to leave the institution at any moment they like” (Costello 1897b, 7).

One might reasonably ask how the nuns supported their charitable activities, since unlike the industrial and reformatory schools also managed by many religious congregations, Magdalen institutions were never funded by government capitation grants. In the main, these institutions survived by means of a combination of charitable donations, endowments received through wills and legacies, and the operation of commercial laundries in which the penitent women worked without remuneration. In addition, many sectors of society benefited from the religious communities’ “state service.” The governing burden of the British colonial administration was lightened as it increasingly ceded responsibility to the Catholic Church for areas of social welfare including education, health care, and institutional provision. Irish society in general, especially the emerging Catholic middle class, strengthened its identity as a nation; its sense of modernization and progress was increasingly vested in notions of social and moral respectability. The religious communities acquired significant social and cultural authority through their charitable work and, in the case of the Magdalen asylums, accumulated financial resources through the operation of commercial and presumably profitable enterprises. Some penitents even might be seen to have benefited from the short-term refuge of the Magdalen in the absence of alternative forms of relief and assistance. In laying the historical background for this study of the Magdalen institutions in twentieth-century Irish society, this chapter considers the intersection of these spheres of interest in the preceding century.

The written history of Ireland’s Magdalen asylums is almost exclusively focused on nineteenth-century Ireland. Indeed, the historical record comes to an abrupt end with the advent of the twentieth century. Because the religious congregations that operated these laundry institutions continue to deny access to records for women entering the asylums after 1900, historians are constrained in what they can say, with authority, about the Magdalen laundries as they developed and continued to operate throughout the past century. We know that these voluntary asylums developed in the nineteenth century in relation to apparently high levels of prostitution in Irish society. We know that the asylums reflect the emergence of women’s involvement in philanthropy. And we also know that they signal the dominant influence of Catholic
female religious in postfamine Ireland. This history underscores, moreover, how Ireland’s Magdalen asylums changed significantly throughout the first 133 years of their existence. Institutions founded with a philanthropic mission became, by the close of the nineteenth century, more carceral than rehabilitative in nature.

The origins of Ireland’s Magdalen asylums stretch back to 1767 when Lady Arbella Denny opened the first refuge for “fallen women” at 8 Leeson Street in Dublin. As its mission, the asylum promised the women that they would be sheltered from “Shame, from Reproach, from Disease, from Want, from the base Society that ha[d] either drawn [them] into vice, or prevailed upon [them] to continue in it, to the utmost hazard of [their] eternal happiness” (Widdess 1966, 5). Closely associated with the moral reform and spiritual conversion of fallen women in the city, Leeson Street, together with the other twenty-two asylums operating in Ireland by the end of the nineteenth century, provided shelter for women considered likely to end up on the streets. As philanthropic enterprises, these institutions attempted to aid poor women while seeking, of course, to alleviate a contemporary social vice, and therefore contributed to the semblance of order and respectability in nineteenth-century Irish society. The name adopted by the institutions was no accident, even if it proved curiously ironic. Influenced by the biblical figure of the prostitute, the name appropriates Mary Magdalene as a role model for repentance and spiritual regeneration. Mary Magdalene repented her sins in time to wash Christ’s feet and dry them with her hair before his crucifixion. In the Bible, she is rewarded by being selected as the first witness to Christ’s resurrection.

Initially, the majority of these institutions—both Protestant and Catholic—were operated exclusively by laywomen with the support of managing committees of male and female trustees. It was not until the 1830s that congregations of female religious began assuming control of Catholic Magdalen asylums. While the Catholic religious—run institutions would continue to operate into the 1990s, the majority of Protestant lay-managed asylums ceased operation by the early twentieth century. Although they shared many common features (e.g., neither institution discriminated along lines of religion, they followed a similar routine of prayer, silence, work, and recreation, and they cultivated a similar environment of guilt and shame related to female sexuality), there were key differences.
Protestant asylums, such as the Dublin Female Penitentiary (1812), the Asylum for Penitent Females (1835), and Dublin by Lamplight (1856), tended only to welcome “redeemable” young women, turning away the “hardened” and “unworthy” sinner (Luddy 1995a, 110–22; Preston 2004, 48–49). It seems likely, therefore, that many of these women were not prostitutes at all but rather women who had been seduced. Despite the limited opportunities for women in terms of “respectable” employment, society at the time understood prostitution as a condition forced upon women rather than selected as a viable means of income. As Maria Luddy explains, “A ‘virtuous’ woman was first seduced, and thus shamed, after this, due to abandonment by her seducer, she continued as a ‘privateer’ and finally became so degraded that she took to the streets” (1995a, 103). Protestant asylums tended to detain women for short periods, typically less than two years. They also proved more successful in returning their reformed penitents to society, typically in positions of domestic service. These lay institutions, for as long as they existed, remained more faithful to the rehabilitative mission of the Victorian rescue movement: success was defined in terms of returning the repentant sinner, as a reformed and useful member, to society.

The religious-run asylums came of age in the immediate postfamine era, a time of major demographic changes for Ireland’s Catholic population. The growing strength of the Catholic Church, initiated with the establishment of Maynooth College (1796) and bolstered by Catholic Emancipation (1829), reached new levels of cultural authority in the postfamine decades as the parish priest assumed a dominating influence in Irish social life. With the development of a coordinated system of parish clergy, the Catholic Church began defining new moral standards and domestic practices that in turn resulted in a new emphasis on the value of women’s modesty and respectability. In the Irish context, the ideology of the domestic sphere was increasingly linked to the “catholic-nationalist ideal of the nation as ‘proper’ family” (Wills 2001, 41). Dympna McLoughlin outlines the chief characteristics of the respectable Irish woman in the postfamine era as possessing “an overwhelming desire to marry” and remain faithful, subordinate, and dependent; a willingness to accept the domestic sphere as her natural habitat, and thus to engage in reproduction rather than production; and a readiness to confine her sexuality to marriage (1994, 266). Such beliefs were increasingly apparent among the emerging Catholic bourgeoisie com-
prising Ireland’s mercantile and strong farmer middle classes, but they were cultivated and disseminated more widely by the newly energized Catholic clergy. Tom Inglis’s *Moral Monopoly* carefully delineates the emergence of this dependent relationship between newly domesticated Irish women and their religious fathers:

It was not simply that the Church gained control of women but that, because of their isolation within the domestic sphere, women and especially mothers were forced in their struggle for power to surrender to the control of the priest and ally themselves with the Church. For women to attain and maintain moral power, it was necessary that they retain their virtue and chastity. This was the message which mothers began to pass on to their daughters. Within the rational differentiation of spheres of moral responsibility, chastity and modesty became the specific goals for women. (1998, 189)

Whereas Inglis insists on women’s adherence and allegiance to the church, historians of Irish women draw a more contentious relationship between women and priests in postfamine society. Cara Delay, for example, suggests that women frequently challenged the authority of the family, the state, and particularly the church: “When they exchanged words with their priest, such women demanded a voice in their own social and religious lives” (2005, 110). Inglis, however, signals important sociological and economic ramifications of the alliance between women and Catholic clergy:

What happened, then, during the nineteenth century was that a Puritan sexual morality, which maintained women as fragile, delicate creatures whose nature had to be protected, began to be instilled among Irish women, first by the Catholic Church and later by women, as mothers themselves. It was the creation and maintenance of such women which was the mainstay of bourgeois Catholic morality, and the basis of the initial phase of modernisation of Irish society. (1998, 189–90)

This fusion of economic and moral interests resulted in the proscription of human sexuality, which was increasingly monitored, supervised, and suppressed as the nineteenth century progressed (Inglis 2005, 17). The sexually promiscuous woman, especially the unmarried mother and her
illegitimate child, presented a serious challenge to the economic stability of men newly converted to the benefits of capital accumulation.\textsuperscript{15} Illegitimacy, tolerated under Ireland’s indigenous Brehon Law, became strongly prohibited, transforming the unfortunate mother and child into social pariahs.\textsuperscript{16} Kenneth Hugh Connell, writing on nineteenth-century observations of Irish peasant society, gives an account of the harsh and intolerant conditions endured by unmarried mothers based largely on evidence collected in 1835–36 by the “Commissioners for Inquiring into Conditions of the Poorer Classes in Ireland.” He states that “in the Irish countryside before—and probably long after—the Famine, it was the lucky mother, or likely mother, of an illegitimate child who was not shunned by her neighbours and despised, if not cast off, by her own family” (1996, 51). Moreover, Connell claims, the woman’s condition or “stain” was never forgotten; even her children’s children bore the stigma associated with being a social outcast. Because women, it would appear, were responsible for providing the mainstay of a new bourgeois Catholic morality, they were severely punished for failing to uphold the implicit requisite standards.\textsuperscript{17}

After 1840 Catholic religious congregations, already engaged in a variety of related charitable works, including running schools and visiting the poor and sick, increasingly involved themselves in custodial care of various kinds.\textsuperscript{18} Nuns, in particular, operated hospitals, fee-paying orphanages, and asylums for the blind, the elderly, the aged, and the mentally ill. With the help of government funding through the Reformatory Act (1858) and the Industrial Schools Act (1868), Catholic religious congregations moved quickly to dominate the management of these institutions (Clear 1987, 103–4; also see Robins 1980; Barnes 1989; Magray 1998, 78). Empowered by the new emphasis on sexual morality and respectability in Catholic Ireland, and responding to an increase in prostitution, a select number of religious orders set about providing “an extensive, organised network of refuges” throughout the country (Luddy 1995a, 122).

In 1832 the Irish Sisters of Charity, an indigenous religious congregation founded by Mary Aikenhead, assumed control of the General Magdalen Asylum, founded at 91 Townsend Street in Dublin, and relocated it to Donnybrook in 1837. In 1850 this asylum could accommodate some fifty penitents, a figure that more than doubled by 1883 (Prunty 1998, 268–69). The Sisters of Charity also assumed control of a lay asylum in