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The Forgotten Mothers of the Cillíní

Introduction

Hidden away, folded within Ireland's rural landscape, cillíní are historically, emotionally and politically complex sites. The landscapes of the cillíní are personal sites of mourning and remembrance for families whose stories have, in many cases, remained hidden away, as part of the burying process of a difficult history. Often referred to as *Children's Burial Grounds*, cillíní were primarily used for babies who were still born, miscarried or who died at birth without baptism thus not qualifying for burial within consecrated ground. The word cillíní describes sites which have distinctly different histories in relation to their landscape contexts, narrative within the communities which they served and the multiple temporalities which underlay each site. Evidence suggests that cillíní were in use from the medieval period (Dennehy, *The Placeless Dead?* 13; Finley 408) until late twentieth century when the custom waned after the Second Vatican Council in 1962 - 1965, however, burial has been recorded after this time as late as 1981 (Graham-George 2016).

All these factors contribute to the overall significance and ambiguity of the monuments. The number of officially recorded cillíní throughout Ireland is estimated at approximately 1,400 (Dennehy, *The Placeless Dead?* 213). This is likely to be a conservative estimate as many have disappeared from living memory or have been lost under new developments (Aldridge 83) even though they are protected under the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994. Throughout Ireland they are known by a variety of names including cillíní, calluraghs, caldragh or ceallunacha (Cuppige 347), reilig, reilicín, cloranan, cahir, cahiree, teampaillin (Crombie 150).

Cillíní were predominantly used for the burial of babies and infants, however, many disenfranchised adults were also eligible for burial here. The list of individuals traditionally quoted in a number of academic papers (Cuppige, Bennett 347; Donnelly, Murphy 191; Finley 409; O'Sullivan, Sheehan 323) and in the populist media include suicides, strangers, shipwrecked sailors, murderers and their victims, criminals, famine victims, those with physical and learning disabilities. A further category which is invariably overlooked are the women who died in childbirth. This omission is concerning as continued non-inclusion will result in the gradual editing out of these women and their lives from the history books.

Within this article the term *cillín*, or the plural *cillíní* will be used, as evidence is presented to support the fact that women who died in childbirth were buried within these locations and the implications of this for Irish social history, feminist studies and for contemporary modern Ireland will be discussed.

As they emerge from the shadows of the past, *cillíní*, like the Magdalene Laundries and the Church-run Mother and Baby Homes are physical reminders of a time when Catholic Church doctrine dominated the lives of the people. In the early part of the 20th century the new Irish State worked in tandem with the Church implementing the moral teachings of the Catholic faith to create as James Smith labels it, an ‘architecture of containment’ (Smith 111), comprised of a physical and abstract set of rules and institutions designed to govern and control female sexuality in an attempt, ‘to confine and render invisible segments of the population whose very existence threatened Ireland’s national imaginary, the vision of Ireland enshrined in President Eamon de Valera’s 1937 constitution.’ (Smith 112). The legacy sowed the seeds for the scandal that was the Kerry Babies and in the same year, 1984, the teenage death of Ann Lovett (O’Leary).

Nothing remains invisible or suppressed for ever. Through the subsequent decades much that was carefully hidden, silenced and concealed has overtime gradually emerged, the most recent being the events surrounding the Tuam Bons Secours (Grierson) and Bessborough Mother and Baby homes (Ó Fátharta). All are sharp reminders that the past refuses to remain hidden. It arrives unannounced into the present, rupturing our sense of order and challenging the sense of national identity. All stark reminders of darker times, often at odds with present day sensibilities.

Even though the origins of the *cillíní* lie farther back in history, they still belong to such a past, a time associated with shame, disgrace and secrecy. Viewed within this context *cillíní* require extreme sensitivity to help facilitate reconciliation with this dark aspect of this by-gone era. Tim Robinson eloquently states the case, ‘Although disused for some decades now, children’s burial grounds are still tender spots on the rural landscape and have to be approached with tact’ (Robinson 94).

The mothers buried here appear even more invisible and spectral than any other group, where social history appears silent regarding their fate. The silence alone leads one to question, why would a Catholic woman who died in childbirth or died ‘unchurched’ (Dennehy *Placeless Dead?* 213) be denied burial in consecrated ground? In the absence of hard evidence and definitive proof all that is available to detect the presence of these women within the *cillíní* is their spectral presence, the mark or imprint left behind (Derrida xx). Their spectrality a result of societal rejection, akin to W. G Sebald’s, outcast individuals whom he describes as those, ‘made spectral, made almost invisible through expulsion and exclusion’ (Wylie 175). It is these traces of a presence, absent yet present which this article follows

and tracks; the material remnants which clearly indicate the fate of these mothers who died un-churched or un-married and whose final resting place was the cillíní:

‘If traces are present yet not always visible, define the “thing” through a web of relations between listener and teller yet are not animated until they come alive in particular settings, are always already known but not recognizable until they are brought out again in yet new but familiar forms, then the concept of spectral traces may provide us with a language of belonging, even as such traces speak of past loss.’ (Till 1)

Studying and connecting the visible ‘web of relations’ of these women’s lives told to us through oral history sources, church teachings, State legislation and archaeological findings will lead us to recognise the traces of this ‘past loss’, of individuals whose lives were written out of the official historical narrative. Interrogation of these sources will establish the reasons why the story of these women was marginalised and restore a crucial element back into the accounts of Irish social and feminist history.

The contradiction lies in the silence surrounding the fate of these women in death, a silence which speaks loudly of absence yet conversely has the potential to conjure their presence. Apart from existing within community memory and oral history, little information can be gleaned about the deaths of these women, and the reasons for their being buried in these informal graveyards.

To gain a greater understanding of the motives behind this apparent invisibility and silence, it is necessary to follow several threads which serve to illuminate the faint traces of the lives of these women which lead back eventually to the explanation on why some women were buried in the cillíní.

Further threads include the importance of the ritual of churching within society and how married and unmarried mothers were to be viewed and treated by society, the Church and the State. The final strand of this web are the canon laws concerning burial practices of pregnant, post-parturient women and un-married mothers.

The absence from the historical record could perhaps in part be due to church law preventing the burial of unchurched women in church grounds resulting in a lack of official burial records.

Further compounding this has been the previous lack of interest by historians in women’s lives, a point which Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O’Dowd, and Maria Luddy make when concluding why the stories of women in history are absent.

In conjunction with male dominated historical discourses they argue that, ‘the training of Irish historians has led them to consider women as historically insignificant.’ (MacCurtain & O’Dowd & Luddy 5). This partially accounts for why these mothers of the cillíní were overlooked, marginalised in life and subsequently in death, deemed too inconsequential to be recorded as part of Ireland’s history.

This article pieces together the traces to establish the context in which mothers who died in childbirth and/or unchurched were buried within a cillíní and in the process restore the memory of these women within Irish social history. By acknowledging the fact that the fate of these women was inextricably linked with the cillíní is a way towards reconciling our modern experience of maternal loss with our ancestral history.

The article will first give an overview of the cillíní before analysing the roles of women within Irish society, as wife and mother alongside maternal mortality. Leading on from this, the Magdalen Laundries and mother and baby homes and the importance of churching for women and the position of unmarried mothers within Ireland. Finally, the article looks at the burial of unchurched women.

Cillíní

Within the rural landscape of Ireland, the cillíní lie concealed. Clandestine burials often undercover of twilight or darkness; the body secreted away into the cillín without the customary wake or church ritual. These were lonely burials ‘[v]eiled in secrecy, mired in shame’ (Traynor) in often isolated and hidden locations where only those in the community with reason to know being familiar with their whereabouts.

In some locations cillíní are found within pre-existing archaeological monuments both Christian and pagan in origin, such as ringforts, beside holy wells and disused ecclesiastical sites. Exact dating is difficult due to the relative few that have been excavated and the sensitivity surrounding them by local communities as many sites have been used well into the mid-20th century, within living memory (Nolan 89). Their use waned after the Second Vatican Council in 1960, however, burial has been recorded after this time (Graham-George).

Seán Ó Suilleabháin listed twelve typical locations where cillíní were sited which included such places as at a crossroads, on a cliff ledge, boundary fences, cliff edge etc (Dennehy *Dorchadas gan Phian* 12). Dennehy added five further locations including, townland boundaries, the corner of fields, beside wooded or marsh ground, the top of a hill and within, ‘all types of pre-existing archaeological monuments (Dennehy 12); liminal places in character mirroring the liminal position of these individuals in death (Dennehy *Placeless Dead?* 219; Finlay 408). Not all sites are on boundaries or crossing places though. Eileen Murphy puts forward the

theory that prominent places within the landscape were specially chosen so they would not be disturbed, so “rather than regarding them as marginal and liminal places, they would have been very much in the thoughts and minds” (Murphy 417) of the families of those interred.

Babies and unbaptised infants who were not baptised were consigned to the cillíní as baptism was considered the only way to cleanse the soul of the sin committed by Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. In *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, Joannes Carolus writes that Original Sin, ‘comes down to us through our origin, or descent from Adam, the head of the human race’ (Carolus 22). In the eyes of St Augustine of Hippo all innocent new-borns were tainted with Original Sin which only Baptism could redeem and save from damnation, a punishment later commuted by subsequent councils to become a place between hell and heaven, Limbus Infantum or Limbo, where innocent un-baptised children without actual sin, would go. Never formally defined as Catholic Church doctrine this theory nonetheless was largely responsible for many thousands of families burying their offspring in cillíní. In 2007 the International Theological Commission under the direction of Pope Benedict declared that as a theory Limbo provided “‘an unduly restrictive view of salvation,” and that there was hope that infants who died without being baptized would be saved’ (“Limbo,” Encyclopaedia Britannica Online).

However, as stated previously cillíní were also the last resting place of disenfranchised adults, denied funeral rites and burial in consecrated ground by the act of contravening social or religious laws. Ven Gennep describes the fate of such individuals as, ‘persons for whom funeral rites are not performed are condemned to a pitiable existence, since they are never able to enter the world of the dead or to become incorporated in the society established there’ (Van Gennep 160). This was the fate of those condemned to the cillíní, cast out in death as they were in life, confined to the margins of life and subsequently that of eternity.

Women in Ireland

During the 19th and into the mid-20th century Ireland was considered ‘by sociologists as an extremely patriarchal society — a situation created and maintained by the institutional Church; the State; the economic structure and the social and cultural construction of heterosexuality’ (O’Connor 1). Pat O’Connor’s work outlines the changing role of women within this patriarchy, she describes the ‘social subordination’ of women up until even recent years as something akin to a natural phenomenon which justified why women were confined to hearth and home (O’Connor 2). This combination of government legislation and Church doctrine served to clearly define and mediate all aspects of a woman’s life.

Wife and Mother

On the whole life for women was narrow and limiting, controlled as it was by both State and Church societal rules. Few opportunities existed for women beyond marriage, childbearing or a religious life. To fulfil the role designated by such a patriarchal society 'being a wife and mother was the utmost and, where possible, sole achievement of Irish womanhood' (Fischer 822). The only true role models for women during this time were those established by the Church and State which defined the quintessence of the moral and spiritual ideal, thus, 'the image of the Virgin Mary was regarded as the ideal role model for women, while the image of the mother was considered to be the prototype of Irish women' (Ryan 112).

As the Catholic Church dominated moral and welfare issues this very one-dimensional view of women was re-enforced. Caitriona Beaumont explored it in her work on women as citizens in the early years of the Irish Free State, and the influence of the Catholic Church. She references Pope Leo XIII writings that women's 'natural' place is in the home, an opinion further endorsed in Pope Pious XI's writings. As Beaumont concludes it was when this philosophy 'was used to justify legislation which limited the opportunities of women and attempted to confine women to their 'natural' role that it took on a more sinister tone' (Beaumont 564). The influence of the Catholic Church on the Free State of Ireland's legislation was clearly evident in numerous statutes, not least in Article 41 of the Irish Constitution written in 1937 which states, 'by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home' (Scanlon 70).

Clara Fischer makes the point that one of the aims of the alliance between Church and State was the desire to create a new nation state of 'moral purity' distinct from that which existed under the previous British rule. The state defined Irish identity was one in which women were to be sacrificed as, 'the moral purity at stake in the project of Irish identity formation was essentially a sexual purity enacted and problematized through women's bodies' (Fischer 822). The idea of female purity became closely entwined with the building of a nation and the identity of a new state. Female sexuality prescribed in this way was only permitted to exist within the confines of marriage and even then, it was about hiding female sexuality, 'a good woman was either a virgin or a chaste mother' (Inglis 21).

The repercussions of these moral teachings and their subsequent enshrinement within the country's laws can be witnessed in the pressure women experienced within their own homes and within the wider society. Through her work analysing the oral history records of Ulster women's experience and views on childbirth, pregnancy and marriage from the Irish Folklore commission set up in 1935, Fionnuala Nic Suibhne found

that significant importance was placed upon the status of marriage as ‘it was only within marriage that a female had official social sanction to give birth’ (Nic Suibhne 13), to do so outside of marriage incurred any number of social and religious sanctions. Nic Suibhne makes an important observation in relation to the Irish Folklore Commission whose remit was to collect and preserve the folk traditions practiced by men and women across rural Ireland especially the Gaeltacht areas. However, the commission only employed men as fulltime collectors, and only one eighth of part-time collectors were women. A similar gender disparity is recognized between the informants with only one sixth being female. This under representation of women as collectors and informers resulted in a collection from a specific male viewpoint, Nic Suibhne made the point that the commission was ‘very much a product of its time, a time when women went unnoticed’ (Nic Suibhne 12). This point was reinforced by, Micheal Briody who considered other contributing factors to this gender imbalance, including the various legislation affecting the rights of women or married women to work. He also stressed that ‘Women were not only not employed as full-time collectors; they were significantly under-represented among the Commission’s informants.’ (Briody 58) This under-representation might also explain the small percentage of information gathered around subjects specifically about women and pregnancy, churching, birthing etc. Other factors at play which potentially affected this type of information being gathered was the Censorship of Publications Acts of 1929 alongside the weighty influence of the Catholic Church which, ‘As a result of this growing puritanism, certain types of folklore were under-collected and certain aspects of folk-life under-investigated’ (Briody 58). It must not be forgotten though that personal preference also played a part in what collectors felt interested in collecting. In the case of child birth Ciara Breathnach relates that within the first twenty years of the commission ‘that very few stories about birthing were collected’ (Breathnach 37) and as well as the points raised by Briody she mentions the attitude of one of the pivotal archivists, Seán Ó Súilleabháin towards women in his guidance book for collectors:- ‘Ó Súilleabháin’s prescriptive guidance in the Handbook gave the world of women little quarter’ (Breathnach 50). The perceived unimportance of women’s lives by a predominantly male organisation, reinforced by draconian censorship publication laws, alongside employment rules regulating women’s work combined to eclipse the details of the lives of women.

Within society marriage was of utmost importance as it was through marriage that a woman gained status through becoming a wife and mother (O’Connor *Blessed and the Damned* 46). This status came at a cost though as Kevin Kearns oral testimony from those who lived in Dublin’s tenements witnessed. Women were subservient, ‘second class citizens’ (Kearns 133) within marriage, it was the men who ‘ruled over women’ (Kearns 64).

A view reiterated by an elderly male informer whom Kearns interviewed, he described women as 'slaves to the men' (Kearns 64). A sentiment echoed by a different male informant, 'The women were *slaves*. Oh, sure, they were slaves, had to be home *all* the time' (Kearns 117, emphasis in original).

The role of marriage was purely to legally procreate, with women having little or no power over birth control. Kearns oral testimonies provide a further insight into how some women felt regarding the purpose of marriage, 'Many wives desperately wanted to limit the number of children they had for survival's sake. But according to the dictates of the Church for a woman to refuse her husband's sexual advances was a sin' (Kearns 44-45). One informer interviewed by Kearns recalled a priest's response in confession when a woman said she didn't want sex with her husband, 'he'd say, " You're married and you have to suit your husband, that's it." They'd tell you to "Get out! I'm *not* giving you absolution" You wouldn't get absolution ... you *had* to have children' (Kearns 190, emphasis in original). Within law and validated by the Church a woman was essentially under the jurisdiction of her husband both financially and morally (Cullen).

Women had very little influence over their reproductive rights as the use of contraceptives were forbidden by the Church, a view further endorsed by the State through the banned sale of such within the country. The influence of the Church was also reflected in the barbaric practice of symphysiotomy as Caesarism sections would only allow for three further pregnancies after which sterilisation was recommended; a course of action though completely contrary to the Catholic opposition to contraception (Morrissey 45). Between the 1940s and 1980s it was estimated that 1,500 such operations were performed (Khaleehi) without full consent showing a complete disregard for a women's voice and wellbeing.

The pressure experienced by married couples was not only from the alliance between Church and State, there was also the added societal expectation laid upon couples to have children. This was exercised from both within and without the family: 'Many's the daughter-in-law who lived with her husband's people and who wasn't inclined to have a family. She often had to suffer bitter reproaches from her people-in-law until such time as she'd prove fruitful' (NFC 1210: 283). There was also the associated stigma for those couples who were unable to have children who were often looked down upon by those in the community for this perceived failing (Nic Suibhne 13). Often the blame for barrenness was perceived as the woman's fault, 'it was the woman who was held responsible for not giving birth and regarded as guilty by the community' (Nic Suibhne 13).

Maternal Mortality

The teachings of the Church ensured that women were bound for multiple pregnancies. To give birth was not without risk and many mothers died either before or after giving birth due to a variety of factors.

To gain an accurate picture of the number of maternal deaths is difficult. Obtaining accurate statistics on maternal death is problematic due to a variety of factors in the ways in which records were kept, recorded etc. Ciara Breathnach and Brian Gurrin's study of maternal deaths between 1864-1902 in Dublin outlines these problems. Through their research they discovered that the figures for maternal mortality rates (MMR) were underestimated due to a variety of reasons not least the ways in which maternal deaths were defined, thus resulting in under-recording, concluding, 'that historic trends in reported MMR for Ireland are inaccurate' (Breathnach & Gurrin 102). They looked at records from two big Dublin hospitals and discovered discrepancies in their record keeping. MMR cases returned from outside these institutions they noted were not well documented at all. The reasons were due to a combination of issues including the difficulties in implementing Government policies in relation to record keeping alongside, 'A post-famine economy, social class, gender and denominational factors all compromised the way in which official information was reported, moderated and recorded' (Breathnach & Gurrin 103).

However, to give even a partial idea of the MMR it is worth looking at the figures from the two big city hospitals in Dublin at the time, the Rotunda and the Coombe, which provide an overview of the situation during the mid to late 19th century. According to records for 1888-1889 there were apparently 16 maternal deaths recorded at the Coombe hospital in Dublin out of 430 births (Breathnach & Gurrin 95) and at the Rotunda, 'An unprecedented 80 childbirth-related deaths occurred in the hospital in 1861-1862, but above 30 deaths in a year were reported on seven other occasions; all of these occurred by the mid-1870s' (Breathnach & Gurrin 94).

These figures give an idea of the numbers of women who died in or as a result of child-birth especially as the figure is likely to be much higher due to the reasons outlined above. These numbers are only representative of an urban area, it is therefore possible that the numbers were higher still in rural areas where women gave birth at home with the aid of the local 'handy-woman' or midwife. What can be surmised though is that many women died as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. The majority of these women who died would most probably have been buried in the churchyard with traditional Christian ritual and ceremony. However, what of the fate of mothers who died in rural areas where superstition held sway or unmarried mothers?

Magdalene Laundries & Mother and Baby Homes

In recent times investigations and scandals into church run institutions such as the mother and baby homes and the Magdalene Laundries has given an insight into how these women were treated in death. The Magdalene Laundries were Catholic institutions run by orders of nuns for un-married mothers and women considered sexually deviant. The first of many laundries opened in 1765 in Dublin and the last finally closing as late as 1996. An article in the Irish Times relates the details of the 1993 exhumation of bodies from a site which had housed a laundry in Drumcondra. The land was being sold for development by the order of nuns who owned the site and had run the former laundry. As undertakers were exhuming the 133 bodies which were already known to be there, they discovered a further 22 unaccounted women's bodies even though Irish law stipulates all deaths to be registered and the location of the burial stated. As these women had no registration relating to their deaths the General Register Office referred to them as "no-trace" women, a term of great significance in this instance as this article attempts to find traces of these women (Humphreys). The situation at Drumcondra is one that was replicated at the Mother and Baby Home run by the Sisters of Bon Secours in Tuam where an unmarked mass grave was found to contain the bodies of mothers who had died at the home. Similar to Drumcondra, out of 9 bodies records only existed for four of the women (O'Reilly).

These unmarried mothers were treated by society and by the religious institutions in which they were incarcerated, as second-class citizens both in life and as can be seen also in death. Their burial in unmarked mass graves or their un-recorded death demonstrates the lack of status these women held within society to the degree that many have become 'no-trace' women, invisible.

Churching

For those mothers who did survive the perils of childbirth, fulfilling her sacred role as wife and mother, the Catholic Church required her to be ritually 'churched' before she was able to re-join society after the momentous occasion of the birth of her child.

Benedictio mulieris post-partum, or the Blessing of Women after Giving Birth also known as, The Churching of Women but invariably referred to as just churching, is a ritual dating from the early Christian period and was a traditional thanksgiving ceremony within the Catholic faith welcoming women back into the church and society after a period of weeks following the birth of a child. The practice ceased after 1965 with the advent of Vatican II but prior to this time legally married Catholic women were expected to undergo this ritual after giving birth. The ceremony of churching required the woman to kneel before the priest holding a lighted

candle whilst he offered a blessing on the status of her new motherhood and welcomed her back into the arms of the church.

The roots of the custom are found in the Book of Leviticus (Lev 12:1-8) of the Old Testament and are related to the Jewish ritual of purification. Leviticus outlines in detail the rules associated with the birth of a male child where the mother 'shall be unclean for seven days' and require 'three and thirty days' before she is purified. On the birth of a daughter the time of being 'unclean' is double that, 'she shall be unclean for two weeks.' requiring a further 'threescore and six days to become pure again' (Lev 12:1-8).

The link between purity and the language used, 'unclean', 'purifying' and the association between blood and impurity in connection with childbirth (Lev 12:1-8) is one of the reasons why the churching was not without controversy as it was deemed by some as a misogynistic practice implying women and childbirth as dirty and unclean, the mother in need of ritual purification, 'The way it was, you were like a *fallen* woman. Like a man and a woman (together) and I was dirty because I had the child ... tainted. ... You were tainted unless you got this candle and (renounced) the devil and all his works. And it made you a Catholic again. See, you weren't a Catholic. *Stupid!*' (Kearns 191, emphasis in original).

Until a woman had undergone churching, which could be some weeks after the birth, she was unable to attend church even for the baptism of her own child or fully participate socially. Louise Lewis interviewed a number of Irish women as research for her drama *The Churching of Happy Cullen*. She describes how many women often felt ostracised until they were churched feeling, 'the stigma of being labelled as 'tainted' or 'dirty' after going through an often difficult but the no less life-affirming joy of childbirth as something that affected them for the rest of their lives' (Lewis).

Others felt the ceremony was misunderstood that it was in-fact a celebration of women, a thanksgiving to God. For many other women it was considered a special time, that liminal period between the birth of the child and resuming domestic labours; an opportunity for a rare but welcome rest.

Women who had not yet undergone churching were considered to 'be in danger because through the process of childbirth she had come to be marginalized by association with forces of the otherworld' (Nic Suibhne 21). An unchurched woman was no longer protected by her Catholic faith, whilst she existed in this post-partum limbo state, she was in danger of abduction by the faeries.

Not only was she marginalised through this belief she was also considered a danger to others, tainted by the experience of childbirth. Leviticus states 'she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled' (Lev 12:1-8), thus, explaining why, it was believed that a woman could not attend church or touch items,

prepare food etc. until she had undergone purification through Churching. Consequently, a layer of superstition and folk belief surrounded the unchurched woman, governing her activities, 'By aul tradition she wasn't supposed to go out at all after the child was born, or make a cake, or churn or do anythin' till she was churched' (NFC 1797:338).

Associated with this were certain folk practices which insinuated that an un-churched woman was embodying evil and that the mother was unlucky and a danger to the fertility of the land, 'it is still the belief in Umhall that a woman is unlucky and calculated to destroy the fertility of rivers and to blast the fruits of the earth until she is churched and purified' (Cook 57). Such beliefs where practiced were in danger of further compounding a woman's feelings of being tainted and ostracized from her community and society after giving birth.

Regardless of the thanksgiving element to the churching ritual, within Ireland it appears to have been viewed as a form of cleansing, 'until the mid-twentieth century 'echoes' of its earlier role as a rite of purification' (Hogan 150) still existed.

Churching as Control

Irrespective of whether the ceremony of churching was purification or thanksgiving does not hide the fact that in the preceding two centuries the Catholic Church in Ireland was not averse to withholding the ritual of churching from women and to use it as a form of punishment or control.

In 1780, as a means to encourage more members of his parish to attend mass, Bishop Troy of Ossory devised a rule which stated that parishioners who chose not to receive Holy Communion 'would not be married in church, permitted to act as godparents, or, in the case of women, churched after childbirth' (Connolly 90). This ruling was designed as a means of spiritual blackmail, at a time when churching was a vital route back into society and the church. As such to withhold was to ensure a woman remained in a permanent limbo state both spiritually and socially. A further example of such a practice can be seen when on the 11th February 1829 a full meeting of Bishops met to discuss how to enforce discipline within their parishes. One of the recommendations made was for only married women to be allowed to receive the churching ceremony (Yates 171).

This leads to an interesting divide between the rather un-subtle ways married mothers or mothers to be were treated compared to those who had broken the social taboo of pregnancy outside the protection of the marriage vows.

Pregnancy outside of Marriage

For those women who had a child outside of the sanctity of marriage the spiritual rulings governing her actions were harsh in the extreme as the Church exerted influence over the community to ensure that she 'incurred the most severe social sanctions' (Connolly 188). In 1831 clergy in the diocese of Dublin were ordered not to church unmarried women, a similar policy was also in place in County Cork (Connolly 180).

In many cases she would only receive churching after being publicly punished and humiliated in front of the congregation, 'in such a way that her disgrace would deter others from the same offence' (Connolly 180). Penance took the form of standing alone at the front of the altar ahead of the whole congregation further singled out by the compulsory wearing of a white sheet (NFC:48 201).

Pregnancy outside of marriage was punishable not just by the church but also by the local community where the woman or girl would be ostracized even by her own family for bringing shame on them. Within this context there was an element of blame where the woman was the guilty party and where, 'The father of the child got away lightly, by comparison with the mother at least. It was said, for example, that no attention was paid to him and that he always got away' (Nic Suibhne 14).

There are numerous folk stories that relate the fate of the unmarried mother at the hands of her local community and parish priest. This story collected from County Galway is about a poor woman who had two illegitimate children, 'and did not the Priest of the parish turn against her, and not only that didn't he turn all the people o' the parish against her. Everyone ignored her, and wherever she went, they all turned from their door, and would give her nothing to eat. Nobody stood to her at all' (NFC 581:312). The story continues with the priest refusing to attend the woman and children and offer last rites even though they were dying. Only a 'silenced priest' eventually prepared her for death which meant 'herself and the two children went to heaven' (NFC 581:312).

This story mirrors the work of Cara Delay into the ways in which women's bodies and sexuality were controlled and mediated within the Irish landscape. In her research Delay relates the story of Áine, a mother of three illegitimate children. On her death when the priest refused the last rites or a Christian burial, she was eventually buried by her neighbours 'outside of sacred land' (Delay 72). It is quite conceivable that Áine's final resting place was a cillín but unfortunately the details are too vague to be certain.

The 1937 story from the National Folk Collection has sad parallels with that of Peggy McCarthy. The play *Solo Run* written by playwright Tony Guerin tells the 1946 story of his father and his neighbour, 25-year-old unmarried and heavily pregnant Peggy McCarthy. Going into labour whilst critically ill with eclampsia and in dire need of medical assistance, local

taximan John Guerin drove her to Listowel hospital where they were turned away by the nun in charge and refused medical treatment as she was unmarried. Continuing onto Tralee hospital they suffered the same welcome. As they drove to a third hospital in Killarney Peggy McCarthy died after giving birth to a baby girl before reaching the hospital. As was the case in parts of Ireland at this time ‘unmarried expectant women were sometimes refused treatment altogether’ (Rattigan 2010:172) at hospital, Kerry County Council had a rule that unmarried mothers were not allowed admittance to the county’s hospitals. The final sad end to Peggy’s story was when the local priest in Listowel refused her body in the cemetery, as she had died in childbirth unwed. However, contrary to the priest’s admonitions Peggy was finally buried in the churchyard as the local people stormed the churchyard (Graham-George).

The case of Peggy McCarthy is a clear example of how during the last century the Church and State worked in unison to police the moral welfare of women by refusing medical attention and ultimately refusing a Christian burial to those who had in their eyes sinned by conceiving a child out of wedlock.

Burial of Married Mothers

As this article has already demonstrated, unmarried mothers/mothers to be were often prohibited burial within consecrated ground. Yet what was the situation for married mothers, those who fulfilled what was considered their sacred and official role yet who died as a result of childbirth and who therefore were un-churched? A woman who died in this way was eligible for burial within the cillíní, as Dennehy says, ‘if the mother died without being ‘churched’... then she could be buried in a cillín as well” (Clifford 2018).

Prior to churching, a woman was considered by both Church and folk belief to be beyond spiritual protection, she was potentially dangerous, un-pure and closely associated with the otherworld. This in-between state which the new mother or mother to be inhabited gave rise to questions about her suitability for burial within consecrated ground.

Throughout the centuries there have been differing opinions on what the fate of women who died in pregnancy should be. One such belief was that whilst pregnant a woman received the sacraments which meant that in death she could be safely buried within consecrated ground. There was the counter argument that the body of a pregnant woman could not be brought into a church. The Council of Canterbury (AD 1236) and the Council of Treves (AD 1310), made it a pre-requisite which ‘decreed that it was unlawful to bury a woman until the foetus had been cut out’ (Anderson & Parfitt 1998: 123).

In his book *The Religious Condition of Ireland 1770-1850*, Nigel Yates

writes that in Brittany during this time the foetus was 'removed by hysterectomy and baptized, with the full cooperation, in this case, of the local clergy' (Yates 303-4). In this way the child was presumably able to be buried in consecrated ground. Unfortunately, no mention is made regarding the remains of the mother and whether the same attitude towards conducting a blessing would allow her burial in consecrated ground.

At certain times in history there was debate around the fate of women who died in this way. The fact that there was a debate at all concerning the differing views and interpretations of these Canon laws leads one to suppose that it was highly likely then that some women would not have been afforded a burial in a Christian kirkyard. In an article examining historical taboos and rituals associated with childbirth in England and Ireland, Susan Hogan comments, 'in some areas a woman who died 'un-churched' could not be buried on consecrated ground' (Hogan 147).

Folk custom further compounded the fate of the woman as it was often much harsher than church laws. Medieval Historian Madeline Gray makes this very point when she says that, 'Folk custom went further than canon law in excluding not only the unbaptised and stillborn children but even women who died while pregnant, since the foetus within them was not baptised.....women who had died in childbirth and even women who had died before they were 'churched' or ritually purified after the birth process were sometimes buried in un-consecrated ground' (Gray 15).

Returning once again to the cillíní Colm Donnelly and Eileen Murphy in their paper 'The Origins of Cillíní in Ireland' make an interesting point in relation to Susan Leigh Fry's work on 'unfortunates' in her book *Medieval Ireland 900-1500: A Review of the Written Sources*. The 'unfortunates' are those individuals who would be barred from burial in consecrated ground such as un-baptised infants, men that died in battle etc and 'women who had died in or shortly after childbirth' as Donnelly & Murphy observe, 'These would be exactly the people that we might expect to find in a Medieval cillíní'. They note that in relation to these 'unfortunates' that Fry 'perhaps significantly... could find no reference or information in any of the historic sources relating to their burial.' Concluding that 'the historic record of Ireland is silent on this matter' (Donnelly & Murphy 213). The lack of records within the historical narrative around these burials within the cillíní demonstrates how women buried in this way have been quietly erased from history.

Even though there are such significant numbers of cillíní throughout Ireland very few have been excavated for a variety of reasons, not least in respect to the fact that these sites were still within use up until relatively recent times making them especially sensitive locations within communities. This situation makes it difficult to know precisely how many women who died in childbirth or as unmarried mothers were buried within the cillíní.

In 2003 a cillín was excavated in the townland of Tonybaun close to Ballina in County Mayo as part of the N26 Ballina to Bohola Road Scheme. The archaeologists working on the excavation dated the site to the late 15th century with use up until the mid-20th century. Out of the 248 burials excavated, 181 were as expected, children ranging from infants to children, juveniles and adolescents. The remaining 67 were adults, 15 male, 18 female and 22 whose sex was indeterminate. As the author of the report, Joanne Nolan, surmises regarding the general age of the females, ‘Women were more susceptible to earlier death possibly owing to the danger of death during pregnancy’ (Nolan 97). In light of Canon Laws discussed earlier and folk belief this comment makes one question whether the women within this cillíní were buried in relation to such. One of the females found buried within the site supports this theory. The body was that of a young woman aged between 25-35 years old who was found with foetal remains inside suggesting she had been pregnant at the time of death. Not only had she died whilst pregnant but three cut marks made by a blade were found on the skull signifying, she had in fact been murdered. Nolan concluded that the woman had probably been placed in the cillín due to both her murder and unchurched status, ‘This would have made her doubly ineligible for burial in consecrated ground—both as a murder victim and because she could not have been ‘churched’ prior to her death’ (Nolan 97).

In an Irish Times article from 2018, archaeologist Eileen Murphy referred to this burial concluding that it was more likely to be ‘the violent nature of her death that may have necessitated her burial in the cillín’ (Clifford). Here are two differing readings of the past. However, when placed within the context of the argument that this article presents, this burial provides an interesting conjecture that relates to the un-churched status of a woman and burial within a cillín alongside other ‘unfortunates.’

Conclusion

‘No justice seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead’ (Derrida 2006: xviii).

Cillíní by their very nature are secretive and clandestine places where the past remains safely locked away with only fleeting glimpses occasionally captured through oral history sources. However, this mode of history is a rich gathering of people’s memories and experiences which at times challenges our view of the past yet gives us access to unofficial histories, those outside the sanctioned re-telling of the past. It is through oral history

we find mention of women who died in childbirth being buried within the cillíní alongside other groups of individuals cast out from society and not regarded as worthy of burial within hallowed ground by the Catholic Church. The burial of un-baptised babies and infants is now well recorded and documented as to a lesser degree are some of the adult burials such as suicides, shipwrecked sailors or strangers. On the subject of women, the evidence is there even though they are absent from the official historical accounts. The traces survive even though this group of women have been made to appear virtually invisible, their fate obscured by a dark silence when one stops to question or find written evidence in the death registers where they were buried. They are absent from written Irish history which was presided over, collected and edited by primarily male historians who lacked interest in the lives of women.

The Irish Folklore Commission was a predominantly male organisation with a substantial gender imbalance in relation to its collectors and informers. This imbalance is evident in the under representation of women's voices and experiences within the collection. The Commission was established by the fledgling Irish State who recognised the importance of Irish culture and its need of preservation to assist in the creation of a national identity, one in which women were central to its perceived ideal but, whose stories conversely were not viewed as relevant as that of their male counterparts. Ironically, it is this silence within the historical record which speaks the loudest.

The historians and the collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission were products of a male centred Irish society led by an all-male Catholic Church and governed by a predominantly male Dáil. Both these institutions worked seamlessly together to forge an ideal of virtuous Irish womanhood, sanctioned by the Church and written into legislation by the State. Women who did not sexually conform to the idealised vision of mother or the Madonna were hidden away in institutions – Magdalene Laundries to do penance for their perceived sexual deviancy or Mother and Baby homes. To be pregnant outside of marriage was an unforgivable sin both spiritually and socially, to be punished by public humiliation, barred from hospital, shunned by the church and one's own community.

It is through these institutions that we gain an insight into how women who died within these confines were treated in death. Buried in unmarked mass graves and at times with no record of their death or subsequent burial they become invisible for a second time from society. The first when they were consigned and hidden away within the institution, the second when their death and burial is not even recorded. A law broken on numerous occasions but without the apparent will of the State to prosecute or even acknowledge these women (Raftery; Gleeson 300). These individuals termed officially "no-trace" as they didn't exist, lacking the correct documentation as confirmation of this fact. Yet their remains survive as

witness to their presence. There has been a noticeable lack of interest and leadership from the Government and the Church neither wishing to take responsibility for the ways in which women were treated in life and in death. It has been predominantly the arts, the media – television programmes, radio broadcasts etc and lay individuals who have led the way in bringing these events to the attention of the public and in the process seek official redress and accountability.

After childbirth a woman was considered by the church to be in-need of blessing or purification in the form of churching; a ritual which at times was with-held by the Church from women either as a punishment or as a form of control. Folk belief and superstition developed alongside the pre-churched woman to denote her as dangerous, impure and liminal. The importance of churching also determined whether a woman who died in childbirth could be buried in consecrated ground or consigned to a cillíní depending upon how Canon Laws were interpreted, when in history and by whom.

Women were certainly buried within the cillíní. Since 1966 and 2003 only 16 sites have been excavated (Murphy & Donnelly 210-211) throughout Ireland. Evidence is present within these sites, in the human remains excavated and the careful consideration of the biography of each individual cillíní as opposed to grouping these monuments as one. However, it is dependent upon how one chooses to read the evidence unearthed, asking the right questions asked and the final interpretation of that evidence.

As this article has illustrated Ireland over the last two centuries was a patriarchal society governed by Church and State the moral welfare of women's lives and deaths with rules designed to control sexual behaviour, punish when strayed or make invisible when the reality threatens the constructed ideal of Mother Ireland.

The findings presented in this paper clearly establish the fact that mothers and mothers to be were, interred within the cillíní. Historians can perform a societally useful function by exposing such issues and help facilitate reconciliation with the past. There is a sense of joint responsibility to be had on the part of historians to firstly actively acknowledge then reinstate these marginalised women to the official narratives; for archaeology to research cillíní as distinctly individual locales focusing upon interpreting the physical evidence of these women buried within these sites and the Irish Government and the Church to acknowledge their role played.

Communities throughout Ireland have gradually reclaimed the cillíní with focus upon the babies, children and famine victims who were buried here. Perhaps with time these same communities will accept and recognize that the cillíní was also the final resting place of many Irish mothers who were denied burial in consecrated ground and thus start the long journey of acknowledging another aspect of Ireland's painful past.

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