

# States of Denial: Magdalene Laundries in Twentieth Century Ireland

## Introduction: The unknown remains

In 1993, a religious order of Catholic nuns, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, decided to sell a plot of land at their High Park convent in Dublin. The site contained a large grave and 133 bodies needed to be exhumed. However, there were only 75 death certificates. Some of the bodies were nameless, and their causes of death unknown. When the exhumation began, the problems continued to mount, as did the body count. It seemed that rather than 133 bodies, there were actually the remains of 155 people in the plot. They were disinterred and cremated, many of their identities remained unknown. Reflecting on this disturbing episode years later, the author Anne Enright wrote that ‘The living can be disbelieved, dismissed, but the dead do not lie. We turn in death from witness to evidence’ (2015). But evidence of what?

High Park was no ordinary convent. It had formerly been Ireland’s largest Magdalene Laundry. The dead were understood to be women who were once *penitents*, sent there during the twentieth century because they were ‘fallen’ women: Women and girls perceived to be deviant or wayward in some way.

The matter of Magdalene Laundries has recently taken on a new urgency. In the space of a few short years this has become a vibrant area of campaigning. This activism has challenged the long-held defence that Magdalene Laundries were primarily refuges for women in need. The new orthodoxy is to describe Laundries as places of confinement and containment, essentially, as prisons. The evidence certainly suggests this to be the better reading. Magdalene Laundries had high walls, locks on doors, and penitents were not allowed to leave.

These places were punishing, there is no doubting that. But their aims were not penological, however. By broadly conceptualising Magdalene Laundries as a ‘punitive carceral system’ (O’Donnell 2018) may underestimate how deeply traumatic and destructive these institutions were. The pains of this form of detention are drawn not from the loss of liberty, but the *loss of self*.

I begin first by providing a sketch of the literature on Magdalene Laundries. While we refer to them now as sites of confinement and containment, and with valid reasons, no one has ever studied these

places as sites of punishment. Punishment and society scholars know that the regimes, programmes and spaces that make up prison life are designed to have certain effects on prisoners. What was the nature of the regimes in Magdalene Laundries? And if punishment is a social institution, what do these regimes tell us about twentieth century Ireland?

Using these questions as prompts, I reassess the idea that Magdalene Laundries were primarily places of detention or labour exploitation. To understand Magdalene Laundries, we need to appreciate the distinctive political, cultural and metaphysical ideas that constituted Irish life, which were embedded in a fundamental reading of Catholic social teaching. I follow the literature on Magdalene Laundries by setting the scene, showing what kind of place Ireland was from 1922, when it became independent. Then, using oral history interviews with women who survived these institutions, as well as archival and historical material to grasp the nun's perspective of their work operating these institutions, we will learn that Magdalene institutions weren't like prisons, they were far, far worse. Using social and cultural theory of Garfinkel and Douglas, I show that the aim of Magdalene Laundries was not to contain women, but to degrade them. The regime was an assault on their sense of self, which I describe as one of *erasure*.

This erasure was especially effective because it also operated on a social scale. Returning to the punishment and society perspective, I suggest that it is not just that we can learn more about Magdalene Laundries by studying them in relation to the rhythms of Irish society. By systematically mapping the routines that made up Magdalene institutions, we can grasp something of the nature of everyday life in twentieth century Ireland, illuminating the extraordinary demands that were made of ordinary people. At the very least, it seems that in the impossible pursuit of national perfection, the best that could be achieved was a state of denial.

## **Magdalene Laundries: Sites of punishment**

We now think of Magdalene Laundries as an Irish phenomena. However, Magdalene institutions were neither distinctly Irish nor a product of the Irish Free State. The first one opened in Ireland in 1766, established to undertake rescue work with prostitutes and other 'fallen women', such as homeless women and girls, alcoholics, all who were deemed in need of moral and spiritual recovery (Luddy 2007). By 1922 there were ten of these institutions located across Ireland. The Magdalene laundries were run by four orders of religious nuns: Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, and Sisters of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd.

After independence, Irish Magdalene laundries took a more punitive turn (Smith 2007; Luddy 2008:293). Women and girls 'were imprisoned behind locked doors, barred or unreachable windows and high walls oftentimes with barbed wire, spikes or broken glass minted at the apex. The gates to the street were locked. Internal doors were also locked, including the doors to the dormitories at night' (McGettrick et al 2021:18). It makes sense then that Magdalene asylums are now described as akin to prisons (O'Donnell 2022), 'punishment and confinement' (Fischer 2016), 'religious detention' (Black 2022), and 'carceral institutions' (McGettrick et al 2021). The phrases most commonly used to conceptualise laundries are 'architecture of containment' (Smith 2006) or to define them as a system of 'coercive confinement' (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2007).

It is now largely accepted that Magdalene laundries warehoused women as part of a broader 'containment culture' (Smith 2007), that was embedded in Ireland's (i) Church/state power relations and (ii) an excessively patriarchal gender ideology, which exploited women and controlled their sexuality (ibid.; Black 2022; Smith 2007; McGettrick et al 2021; Fischer 2015; Luddy 2007). While O'Sullivan and O'Donnell (2012) argue that (iii) the scale of Ireland's use of confinement was the product of Ireland's economic system, that sought to remove those surplus people who became extraneous to the modes of production.

This body of research challenges the idea that during the twentieth century Magdalene penitentiaries were still primarily refuges. To suggest that they were prisons and sites of containment exposes the great injustices women were subject to in twentieth century Ireland. These women and girls were not given asylum, they were not cared for, they were confined.

While the work of activists has been awe-inspiring, in reclaiming and renaming this past, such accounts often rely on a fairly generic view of the prison or the carceral, collapsing the distinction between different forms of confinement. All prisons confine people, obviously. But what happens after the moment of confinement differs remarkably between prison systems (Brangan 2021). The pains of detention may be unavoidable, but in prisons we are doing specific things with pain (Sparks 2001). Prison life is a scheduled regime of tasks, rewards and punishments that are designed to do things to those imprisoned, to change or alter them in some way (Bosworth 2019; Hannah Moffat 2000; Foucault 1977), so that they may fit with wider social norms, to coerce them into being good citizens of one kind or another. The logic of these penal aspirations reflects broader social concerns and cultural mores (Garland 1990). But their internal dynamics can tell us something more general about how society is

put together (Carlen 1983; Simon 1997). What then does it mean when we say Magdalene Laundries? What routines made up the daily life of those women and girls imprisoned there? What was the logic behind this form of incarceration? What was its function? As such, what happened to these women and girls and why? And what does that reveal to us about Irish society in the twentieth century?

Magdalene Laundries were indisputably punishing places of incarceration, but were Magdalene Laundries really so similar to all the other sites of 'coercive confinement' (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2007) in Ireland and elsewhere, such that punitive 'containment' (Smith 2006) is the best way to conceive of them and their purpose? By continually describing Magdalene Laundries as sites of containment or confinement, suggests to me at least, that we haven't yet systematically analysed their internal regimes, and that we have not fully grasped the nuances of this aspect of Irish social order in the twentieth century.

To make the fullest sense of penal power in the example of Ireland in the twentieth century we need to begin instead in a grounded manner, examining the practices that constituted this penal regime. Using the stories of the women and who spent time in Magdalene Laundries, we can trace the regime from the moment of incarceration. The analysis is based on 33 oral history interviews with women who were once confined in a Magdalene Laundry. These interviews were conducted by the Justice for Magdalenes campaign group in 2012-2013, and in recent times they made these interviews publicly available so that Irish society can remember what happened and try to makes sense of it.<sup>1</sup> The article then moves to look at the available archive of materials from the nuns and other religious in order to identify the precise logic behind what was, as will become clear, Ireland's profoundly disturbing penal culture. But if the past is a foreign country that can be disorientating and unfamiliar (Bosworth 2001), then to have any hope of making sense of Magdalene laundries, we must first acclimatise ourselves to the very different cultural conventions that once shaped Irish life.

## The Irish Free State

After a long anti-colonial struggle against Britain, Ireland became independent and formed the Irish Free State in 1922. While it is now increasingly common for historians to identify the legacies of imperialism in former colonies, and to see continuity rather than penal transforation in the new post-colonial nations (Brown 2017), nothing could be further from the case of the newly independent Ireland. This was a time of change.

In 1943, after 21 years of Irish independence, the former nationalist rebel and then Taoiseach (Premier), Eamon DeValera, gave a famous radio address that became known as *The Ireland we dreamed of*. This line was singled out because it captured the spirit of DeValera's speech, which was to describe exactly what the leading elites had been trying to achieve over the first two decades of independence:

'The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children...and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. *The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires*'

The life that God desired was seemingly utopian, envisioning a society that was humble, traditional, rural and Catholic. The problem was that the 1920s was also a time of exuberance. Modernist literature, jazz music, cinema and changing fashions were expressions of the post-war creative and critical atmosphere that was sweeping across Europe. Fresh new thinking like this had no place in a new nation that was seeking to perfect a traditional version of itself. Modern arts and culture were openly decried as sites of temptation. Claims were made by priests and concerned citizens that Ireland was being swamped by newspapers, books and films that were no more than foreign 'filth' (Pašeta 2003) and a 'modern menace' (Luddy 2007), which were a threat to the moral well-being of the new Catholic nation.

The panic really set in when illegitimate births, infanticide and rates of venereal disease began to rise in the 1920s (Earner-Byrne 2008). Surely there was no greater signal that Irish were failing to master the habits of religious life, and hence self-control, when sex outside marriage was occurring with such rampant frequency (Finnane 2001). This concern was not simply that this was a crisis of social order, but a sign that sin and evil were spreading. The rise of evil became a major preoccupation of the new state.

The stakes could not have been higher. For Catholics, eternal life awaits them in the Kingdom of Heaven. Eternal life is never guaranteed, however, it is a gift from God – and it is repeatedly put in jeopardy by mortal acts of sin. If you are a devout Catholic, sin is a far greater transgression than crime. Crime crosses the lines of legality, but sin offends God. Sinners are understood to have fallen from grace. To cleanse

oneself of sin, one must repent, through prayer, labour, and self-sacrifice. The greater the sin, the greater the penance. Suffering is redemptive. However, an excess of sin and an absence of repentance meant there was a risk of eternal damnation (O'Collins 2017).

In an increasingly secular world, these bygone beliefs are sometimes dismissed as naive, or simply backward mysticism. But in doing this, we make it impossible to make sense of this past. In Ireland for much of the twentieth century these were the basic facts of life. And many believed that by avoiding sin they could reach the ideal Catholic state: Purity.

In this time of panic, purity was declared to be a key source of the new nation's 'strength' (Irish 1925). Purity requires living without error, to be morally unblemished. This could only be achieved through the rigours of self-denial, such as chastity and abstinence. Purity can be maintained through daily and intensive prayer and toil, remembering that the Devil makes work for idle hands. Purity therefore meant perfection. Perfection is an impossible standard for a person, let alone a nation, to achieve. Yet during the first decades of the Irish Free State, this Catholic conception of the citizen and human condition took hold. Ireland was to be a proud Catholic nation, which required a pure Catholic population. For that, new regulations and forms of control were required.

If you believe the citizens of your nation have souls that live forever, then the tactics of government, seeking to balance the mere mortal matters of health and wealth, do not go far enough when the job of a state also becomes the prevention of sin and the salvation of souls. In post-independence Ireland, it was believed that the government simply did not have the capacity to manage, let alone foster, morality on a national scale. In the Irish Free State, the government and Catholic Church increasingly shared power. Religious orders of nuns, priests and Christian brothers took greater control of the schools, hospitals, and industrial schools (Inglis 1998).

Confronted with the ambition of purity but the reality of people's 'ordinary human weakness' (Irish Independent 1925), anything that could arouse the senses was to be 'purged' from Irish life (Department of Justice 1931:15). From 1927-1937 there was a flurry of activity. A committee on "evil literature" was established with a remit for banning of books, dance halls were strictly licenced, and contraception and divorce were prohibited. Imported goods were monitored to ensure that newspapers and magazines with foreign ideas were not making their way onto the island. This new legislation helped erase 'dangerous occasions of sin' (Irish Independent 1925) from the social landscape so that all Irish citizens could, it was believed, more easily repress their desires and practice self-denial (Inglis 2005),

which was necessary for them to achieve the level of purity that was desired. A new constitution with a strong Catholic ethos was written in 1937 that made clear the expectations and values of the new Irish nation were traditional and Catholic (Whyte 1980:24).

The reaction to this new regime was mass exodus (not helped by Ireland's acute poverty), as people fled Ireland for lives less oppressive and restrictive. For those who stayed behind, levels of Catholicism rose, with 95% of the nation identifying as Catholic by the 1950s (Inglis 1998), and a national routine bound up in popular piety and devotional rituals developed. Catholics were obliged to attend mass at least once a week, families sat together every evening and prayed on bended knee, saying a decade of the rosary. People's hopes hung on the devotion of their weekly novenas (ibid.:144). Irish people attended occasions of public prayer and committed to their 'penitential obligations', undergoing periods of fasting and abstinence (Fuller 2004:20). Twice a day, every day, the national radio station sounded the bells of the Angelus that called people to prayer. Saturday evenings saw long lines for confession outside churches across Ireland, as Irish men and women sought to divulge their sinning and receive their penance, driven by a very real and pressing fear they may die 'in a state of mortal sin and thus losing eternal salvation' (ibid.:21). After independence, Irish people came to be ruled – either by their hearts or habits – by the Catholic Church (Whyte 1980).

In the Irish Free State, Catholicism became politicised, and Irish policy and legislation became Catholicised. If Catholic purity was the goal, then purging was the mechanism by which to achieve it. And it was in this repressive, fanatical, and censorious atmosphere that Ireland's peculiar penal system outside the criminal justice system emerged.

## The Magdalene Laundries

### *Entry Routes*

Magdalene Laundries expanded in use under the new Irish Free State and outstripped the size of the prison (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2007). In 1951, Magdalene institutions had a capacity of 1020, compared to 440 adult male prison places (Department of Justice 2013; O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2007). Based on the 1951 census data, that means for every 100,000 men in Ireland 29 were in prison, while for every 100,000 women 70 were contained at a Magdalene Institution. When we discuss Magdalene Laundries we are not discussing something peripheral, these were Ireland's main carceral institution.

In the wider discourse laundries are often discussed as hideaways for women who were pregnant outside marriage. Only a small number of women and girls were sent to a Magdalene laundry after giving birth in secret in a Mother and Baby Home, however. The ones who were transferred to the laundry were usually those who were categorised as “repeat offenders”, who had a second illegitimate baby. Otherwise, the routes in were less explicit than this. Girls were often sent there after aging out of industrial school system at 16. Many of these girls were born as “illegitimate” children and would have been separated at birth from their mothers to be raised in institutions. Others were sent in by their families, a priest or a concerned neighbour because the girl or young woman was perceived to be gallivanting or skipping school. Sometimes girls who reported being sexually abused found themselves in a Laundry. In these cases, police or priests would come to take the girl away, there was rarely any punishment for the abuser. (Smith 2007; Department of Justice 2013). Those who had been sent there were described broadly as those girls who were ‘giddy, irresponsible and undisciplined from the start’ (The Evening Herald 1933). Given the diversity of runways into the laundries, that is why women as old as 89 and girls as young as 9, were recorded as being received into these institutions.

Entering a Magdalene institution as a penitent was like crossing the river Styx and descending into the underworld of Irish life. It was like ‘going into the unknown’ (Kathleen), not least of all because most women and girls arrived having not been told where they were going. They were rarely informed of why they had been sent there, and sometimes they didn’t even know where in the country they were. The interviews are filled with stories of women who were brought to a laundry under some other cover story. They sat in the back of cars being told by a priest, a social worker, a nun, that they were going on a holiday, being brought to a new job, or a nice new home. Whatever situation they had been in, the industrial school, the abusive home, on the edge of homelessness, they were often lured to Magdalene Laundry on the pretence of something better, for that moment, they believed they were about to be liberated from their misfortune.

### *The Regime: Indefinite silence, prayer, toil, and humiliation*

The subterfuge that cloaked their arrival at a Magdalene laundry can only have intensified the bewilderment and terror that marked their first overwhelming days there. Like so many women, Beth recalled her initial sensation as shock and confusion: ‘I said, “where am I?” and I was roaring crying.’ Martina’s first day was just as disconcerting and unnerving: ‘oh good Jesus, where am I?’ I started getting frightened then. I got a big fright. I didn’t know where I was, and I was shaking and I was going, ‘oh my God, where am I?’



Answers were not forthcoming. There was no induction, women and girls were plunged into work in the Laundry. It was laborious. They fed towels into pressers, stirred steaming pots of washing, they stood at sinks as they worked cuffs and collars with handbrushes and sunlight soap. They starched the coats and sheets and mended their wear and tear. They ran sheets through the mangles and manually operated big, hefty, industrial spinners. They confronted the elements, as steam rose off the garments and as they waded through floors flooded with pools of water and avoided the searing heat of the metal machinery.

Whose washing were they scrubbing? Everyone's. Priests and prisoners had their uniforms and vestments treated alike, the crisp linens of hotels, restaurants, and family dining rooms passed through these women's hands. They did this from morning till evening, Monday to Saturday.

It would be easy to see this as a regime of slave labour, but other practices were as integral and overwhelming as the forced work. Upon arrival, women and girls had their *hair cut off*. As Mary Currington described it, after arriving:

'My hair was very dark and down to my waist, beautiful hair I had, and that was cut up to my ears in no style, just straight across like, a pudding bowl haircut I got. And I said, 'why are you cutting my hair?' You know, I started crying that I was losing my hair. And she said, 'you have to have your hair short here'.

Martha's haircut was even less sympathetic. After she arrived, Martha said a nun 'brought me down to where she cut me hair first, I mean I was bald, no hair at all she just cut me hair completely'.

For Maureen, the sight of these short haired women only added to the unfathomable feeling of the place: 'All these terrified looking women, really scary looking women, all grey looking, and short, cropped hair and oh it was very, very frightening'.

It was not just their hair that was gotten rid of. The elimination of aspects of who these women were was the theme. When they arrived in the Laundry *their names were also taken*. This was non-negotiable. Pippa became Theresa, Evelyn became Margaret, Maureen became Frances, Catherine became Columba. Sometimes they weren't even afforded the dignity of a pseudonym, and were instead designated by only a number. That is how Sarah, as a girl at the age of 15, spent two years known only as 60. So, they entered a world of anonymity, as Mary described it.

Their voices and their views were also curtailed by the *rule of silence*: No talking. No making friendships. This was strictly observed, as Sara found out on her first day: 'I was put up folding clothes, folding sheets, and I said to this girl, 'what's this place?' I said, 'where am I?', you know. She said, 'this is a Magdalene convent'. She says, 'shh, we can't speak'. She said, 'you're not allowed to speak'. Kate recalled the same: 'From the first day we went into the Laundry, you couldn't speak to anybody.' Lucy described how they would get whipped with a stick across backs of legs for talking. They soon came to learn, as Margaret did, that 'silence was everything. Silence was a very must, you know'.

On their break they filed into the large refectories and occupied long communal tables. and yet even then, silence was to be observed. No gossip was exchanged, no sense of reality was allowed to resume. A nun was perched upon a chair above them, 'the throne', watching as they sat in solemn silence, eating their bread with a fatty smear of meat dripping.

The only noise that would perforate the quiet was the relentless churning of the machines and the thrum of *prayers*. A nun would be with them in the Laundry, reading out litanies, rosaries, and stations of the cross, like an incessant incantation, to which they would make only the required curt responses. Kathleen recalls prayers ongoing during the work in the laundry: 'It was all these prayers and you have to keep answering the prayers as they were going on'. It was like having 'religion was rammed down your throat' (Margaret).

They had no name of their own, could make no mention of a life they once had, and could make no attachments to other women and girls in there. They lived in a haze of loneliness and learned to endure a world of *isolation*. As Philomena lamented, you could work side by side with women all day, but felt you were 'miles away' from anyone and anything. This isolation was total for most of the women, who were not only cut off from each other, but cut off from outside world. They received no visitors and no letters, and were rarely, if ever, allowed out for more than a short, supervised walk.

The walks they did take felt like parades of humiliation. These were not regular occurrences, but for those that experienced them, they walked in a line of silent, uniformed penitents. Children spat on them and jeered as they passed, adults stared and muttered. Perhaps this was no accident, as the nuns employed *humiliation* as part of the institutional routine. Mary Currington, who spent six years in a Laundry after a life in institutional care, described how 'It was all psychological and mental humiliation...We were very humiliated by the nuns', and that their days were marked by 'embarrassing moments'. Mary also recalled there being 'lots of humiliation'.

A common form of humiliating punishment involved agonising public displays of forced contrition, such as kissing the floor in front of a nun as an apology. This would take place in the refectory while everyone ate, in silence, watching on. Afterwards, while the other women continued to sit at their communal tables, the offender, as it were, was made to sit alone at a small “penance table” directly in front of the nuns.

Other victims of humiliation suffered shockingly blunt insults. They were told that God didn’t like them for one reason or another. The humiliations like this also seemed to be designed to make them feel like dirt. In a harrowing account, Martha described the abusive humiliation of: ‘getting told you know, “you’re a dirt, you’re dirty like, we have to do this because you have the devil inside you”...and I mean they drummed it into us, drummed it into us’. Sometime the nuns took a more literal approach to these instructions. Evelyn is one of several women who remembers actually being washed after arriving: ‘I had a bath because I, apparently, I was dirty. And the nuns washed you – you didn’t wash yourself – the nuns washed you. That was degrading in itself... I wasn’t allowed to wash myself because they had to make sure that I was clean, because God doesn’t like a dirty person’.

Other times this scheme was more malevolent. Some women told of times they had to strip and then have their naked bodies subjected to a volley of cruel and degrading comments from the nuns. For some women this was a part of the regime, a systematic Friday night humiliation.

So many women reported being told they were “nobody”, that they had nobody and belonged nowhere. The abiding sense they were left with was that they were nothing.

Besides these humiliation tactics, women found the laundry work itself totally humiliating:

‘I mean even hankies, we had to handle, it was dreadful, and dirty underwear, it was really degrading’  
(Martina)

‘The laundry came in they were all big sacks and we had to sort through it all and it was all filthy dirty and the smell of it and everything was awful’ (Lucy)

It will not come as a surprise to learn that when women were asked to sum of these places, they said things like:

'Degrading' (Mary Currington)

"They would make you feel really, really, really they, they would degrade you". (Evelyn)

These women never knew when their degrading confinement was coming to an end because the exit routes were never spoken of. They waited for the day the nuns may let them know they were moving on. It could be that they were being transferred to a job as a housemaid with a local family who the nuns considered to be Catholics with good standing in the community. Not all women waited for the days when release was gifted to them, they made a break for it if a gate was unwittingly left open. Those who escaped usually found their fortunes were short-lived, as they were likely to be tracked down by the police and returned to the Laundry.

For those who did leave, a peculiar thing happened, they had to pretend they had not been in the Laundry. It was considered so shameful to have been a penitent in a Magdalene Laundry that these women found themselves participating in this strange state of denial. For example, Frances withheld this huge part of her past from her children until recently: 'I did make up lies, but they weren't lies, they were actually shame...You were afraid to tell the truth, so you shame yourself down to the lowest to get away with it'.

For Bernadette, 'it just was a non-event, but a non-event to be a bit ashamed of. And nobody else was talking about it, so I didn't either...the rest of the family were as if nothing had happened'. She had been in a Magdalene Laundry and a Mother and Baby Home, after which her baby was given away. When she was pregnant with her second baby years later, she was chatting to her sister, who knew about the first pregnancy and adoption. Her sister asked how this pregnancy was, to which Bernadette responded it was hard to judge because she had 'nothing to compare it to'. The rule of silence and sense of humiliation from the Laundry followed them into their lives. It engulfed them, permeating the intimacies between sisters, suffusing the relationship between a mother and her children. Women who were not so discreet were told to stop making things up, to leave it alone. They were met with walls of denial at every corner. They quickly learned that this was the condition of their freedom. The denial of this past, of these transgressions, was somehow formalised in small exchanges like these. And so, it was 'as if it never, never existed, what happened' (Margaret).

As disorientating as this state of denial must have been, it was still a form of freedom, because it was not beyond the realms of possibility that they would never get released. What most tortured many of

the women held in Ireland's Magdalene laundries was the knowledge that this was potentially *indefinite incarceration*. The Magdalene laundry population was often elderly as a result. Many of the women interviewed described their initial reactions to seeing so many old women in the Laundry in those first few distressing hours, as they tried to make sense of what was happening. Mary Smith said 'I seen all these elderly ladies there and I knew that once the door, what really traumatised me more, to hear that door locking behind you and you were never, never, never to walk out that door again, never!' They described these older women as robot-like, automatons, whittled down so that they displayed few traces of the women they once were.

When these women died there was little to mark their death. It seems that their family rarely came to retrieve them. The women interviewed knew they too could be condemned to die in the Magdalene Laundry; anonymous, their own name long since lost, their connection to their former life obliterated, and ultimately buried in an unmarked or mass grave. These women were, as Margaret put it, 'locked away and shamed away and they go to their graves. They were the silent people'. They came to realise that this could be 'your place for the rest of your life. You're washing and washing' (Mary Jefferies).

## **Catholic Carcerality: Sites of erasure**

That is a thumbnail sketch, but it is clear that Ireland's Magdalene Laundries amounted to something much more disturbing than being a generic carceral institution, a site of coercive confinement like any other that existed in Ireland. Yes, they were prison-like, but they were not prisons, because the punishment was felt to be more intensive. Repeatedly women who were there said exactly this.

Margaret felt the Laundry was akin to banishment, to be sent so far away that there was no coming back, no escape. Many of the women likened the Laundries to the kind of penal system you get in authoritarian regimes:

'It was almost like you were sent to prison for something that you never did. The only thing I was guilty of, I love life, I loved enjoying myself, they didn't want that. They were like the Taliban of today' (Mary).

'They [the nuns] were only one step down from the Nazis' (Mary Creighton).

'It was worse than the, the concentrating camp [sic] to me, that's what it was' (Pippa).

'Horrible, lonely, depressing. It's not, it, it, I'm sure it was probably even worse than prison camp, you know one of these, yeah concentration camps' (Evelyn).

If this form of confinement was experienced as something deeper, more total, and worse than prisons, we need to refine our understanding of these penal institutions. We need to ask why were Magdalene Laundries so demeaning? What was the aim of the regime? What kind of penal power was this?

### *The nuns*

The usual answers of Church power, gender, and economics (Smith 2007; Black 2022; O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2012) don't help us explain the intensity of this regime. These top-down explanations are too broad to be able to precisely explain the logic behind the routines and daily rules that made up Laundry life. Why debase them, day in, day out, and potentially, forever?

We can only come to make sense of this distinct penal culture by identifying its motivating ideas and aspirations. When we read the nun's rule books, vocational guides and other religious accounts in the archives, the explicit rationales behind this regime are quite clearly stated as moral reclamation: the salvation of souls through abrogation of self.

It was believed that the tactics employed at the Laundries had a higher moral and spiritual purpose. That is why Irish nuns also lived by these rules of hardship: A different name, short hair, a rigorous regime of devotions and penance. They believed self-denial and the abnegation of self led to a superior life, it was the road to purity, and hence the path to everlasting life. As one Sister recalled, 'There was something in that hard and suffering life that *cleaned you interiorly*...I thought if I stuck to this then really I've been called to heaven' (quoted in McKenna 2006:90, my emphasis). Putting these same Catholic techniques to work on the penitent women and girls before them, the nuns would teach them the rewards of surrender. If these women and girls were the fallen, the nuns were intent upon their ascension.

In Magdalene Laundries, the nuns' 'lofty mission' was 'to bring penitents to God' (The Cork Examiner, 1927:3). And they achieved this by getting the women, who were marked by 'degradation and sin', to live 'holy lives, strengthened as they were by habits of virtue' (ibid.). The Sisters of the Good Shepherd said they were working with 'a definite plan to save immortal souls' of Magdalene penitents, and that they were guided by their 'spiritual vision effectively to find correct values' to establish or make good each and every citizen's relationship with 'their Creator' (Sr Mary 1939:1-2).

It was repeated across the nun's own rule books that this pursuit demanded the 'abrogation of self', a 'true spirit of self-abnegation' (Sisters of Charity 1912:8) and 'continual mortification' (Irish Sisters of Charity 1927 para.93). They believed this could be achieved through 'laborious and fatiguing duties' that were 'crucifying' in nature (Sisters of Mercy 1869:51). This remorseless regime was intended to achieve 'blind obedience, rejecting every opinion and judgement of theirs to the contrary' (Irish Sisters of Charity 1927:para.74-75) so that they may take '*custody of the senses*' and be 'ruled' by God like 'a dead body' (ibid., my emphasis).

They did this by creating what they described as a 'strict enclosure' that safeguarded Magdalene penitents 'from a temptation to return to the old life [of] gaiety and excitement' (Sr Mary 1939:129), and 'cut away from mundane pleasures' and enduring 'laborious and industrious lives with sublime ideals' (The Cork Examiner, 1927:3). Laundry life was organised so that it would 'break asunder the bonds that hitherto fastened them [Magdalene penitents] to things of earth' in order to 'obliterate everything' (1939:133): these women's individuality, their sinful inner lives, and thus their souls may be ready to receive God. God, in turn, would be willing to accept them once again. Hair cutting, name changes, labour, silence, prayer and humiliation were 'exercises designed to root out the germs of vice, to regulate the motions of the soul, and assist in acquiring virtues' (Irish Sisters of Charity 1927 para.35) of obedience, humility, modesty, and chastity. And in their obedient state, if this system worked as it should, it was hoped that women sent to a Magdalene laundry would live out their years there, 'hidden and buried from the world' (1939:139).

Magdalene laundries were not simply about the deprivation of liberty, or an act of retribution, *a la* the prison. If prisons aim to reform people so they may return to society, better citizens, Magdalene Laundries alienated women from their lives and this world, to secure their citizenship in heaven. As the probation office described it in 1941, a Magdalene Laundry differed from a prison because a Laundry was a regime of 'religious training' that was 'directed with the purpose of leading the subjects to a *permanent renunciation* of the world and to a life of penance' (1941:5, my emphasis).

### *Degradation and erasure*

The suffering these women experienced arose not solely from being confined. What these women experienced is perhaps better understood as a kind of degradation ritual (Garfinkel 1956). Key to degradation rituals are the creation of feelings of shame and humiliation in the person, and Magdalene Laundries clearly operated this sort of system. But I only say a *kind of* degradation ritual because these ceremonies usually begin with a public declaration of the transgression, and it is an event aimed at

lowering people in their social status. But in Ireland's Laundries, humiliation was not an event, and it was not public. It was a *furtive* and *systematic regime of degradation* that was more excessive and total because it was *enduring*, that is because it was not about lowering status, but *erasure*.

This is exactly how women described the overall effect of the regime, it was as if their sense of self was being eradicated:

'They took your freedom, they just, they took your identity' (Mary)

'The Magdalenes tore anything that was left there. They just sieved it right away out from me' (Martina)

'We were never allowed kind of, to be human, really!' (Margaret)

Some of the women described themselves as being rendered completely 'blank', or being 'blanked', as if it was an active aim of the regime:

'I just went completely blank, I think, in there...They had destroyed me so much in there, when that door locked, that I think they just blanked me' (Mary Smith).

Mary and Nora both recalled this transformation as feeling like they were being 'brainwashed'.

This regime of Catholic carcerality demanded a devotional discipline that was unrelenting, grinding, and potentially never-ending. It became a redemptive regime of perpetual penance, and hence suffering, for the women and girls confined in Magdalene institutions. Women and girls sent to Magdalene Laundries were humiliated and degraded. They were dehumanised: their names were erased; their hair was shorn off, their voices were silenced, their connection to outside world was erased. And if they left the Laundry, they found their experience there had also been erased.

## States of Denial: Purity and penalty

For decades in Ireland more women were incarcerated in Laundries than men were imprisoned. This stark disparity between the sexes in levels of confinement shows that Ireland was astonishingly sexist and patriarchal, and that the Catholic Church held tremendous power. The large body of research on this topic to date has established this with great clarity and force. But the internal dynamics of Ireland's



Magdalene Laundries tells a story far broader in scope than when we study them exclusively as objects of Catholic gender order or Catholic power.

There was clearly a theological impulse driving this system. However, if sites of confinement are also social institutions that can be used as a lens onto wider social dynamics, then we can perhaps make a preliminary assessment of the larger canvas of forms and meanings that might explain Ireland's use of Catholic carcerality. In doing so, we may also raise some questions about the nature of Irish life in the twentieth century.

In Catholic Ireland, moral purity and virtue were explicitly exemplified as the national motif, but you can't have purity *if you know otherwise*. The dirt and sin that defied it was to be scrubbed from the national consciousness. As Douglas has written, eliminating dirt 'is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment' (1966:2). By erasing these women through confinement and denial, the Irish were making the nation 'confirm to an idea' (ibid.). In the first decades of the Free State, that exalted idea was a fundamentalist Catholic nation. And as we know, when societies are being reordered around ideas of purity, then depraved and dehumanising penal regimes become not only plausible, but possible.

The Magdalene Laundries tell us how Ireland reacted to the unwelcome realisation that the faultless Catholic nation was impossible. The messy reality of an imperfect, mortal society had to be eradicated. It was not simply that women and girls were locked away, warehoused and exploited through labour in Magdalene laundries. What these women experienced was closer to the ideational impulse to a purge. As Mary Creighton put it: 'what Hitler done to the Jews. Well if there was someone come along like Hitler and said, 'right we want all you purged and all these nuns and done a purge like they done for the witches'.

These women did not meet the same gruesome ends as those who faced mass extermination. Catholicism, which was the foundational ideology of the new Irish nation, bars against taking life (thou shalt not kill). But they could be held for life. If not, these sites of erasure created a shame and stigma that aimed to stifle any acknowledgment of these institutions and hence a denial of the indiscretions that had given rise to them. Irish society could plausibly deny that the new humble utopia of Catholic Ireland had the usual social problems of poverty, pregnancy outside marriage, class inequality, and broken families. Denial had come to be 'built into the ideological façade of the state' (Cohen 2001:10).

This is also why these women were rarely dealt with in the criminal justice system, and why describing Magdalene Laundries as akin to prisons is never going to be more than a rhetorical claim. Magdalene Laundries were places for all the women who did not fit in with Ireland's new virtuous social order. The reach of the criminal justice system, with its repertoire of reintegration, reform, due process, and transparency, does not go nearly far enough when what is required is a form of exclusion that achieves cultural cleansing. We see what happens to the penal system when it must do more than confine, but instead purge the nation of its problem populations. Magdalene laundries were used where other penal forms would fail. They were the 'deepest places – ends-of-the-line; holes; *termini*' (Sparks 2002:559).

The Irish social context helps us understand Magdalene Laundries, but looking within the regime we also learn more about the nature of Irish social cultural life in the twentieth century, and what its intolerances were, as well as its aspirations. We cannot understand punishment by focusing on the imbalances or abuses of power alone (Garland 1990). In the early twentieth century Ireland, denial was a state project, but it was also cultural.

For the Catholic nation to succeed, everyone had to endeavour to take "custody of their senses".

All forms of "gaiety and excitement", life's little mundane pleasures, such as Dance Halls, literature, lively music, and of course, sex, came to be seen as tantamount to vice and evil. Censorship made the island itself become a "strict enclosure" against the invasion of immorality, dirt, and disorder. These acts were intent to remove temptation and to cleanse people's souls of impurity so that they could dedicate themselves to work, prayer, penance, frugality, and hence, purity. As critics of Ireland's emerging Catholic social order worried in the 1920s, it felt like the new state was intent upon imposing 'hygiene of the mind' upon all citizens (Seanad Debates 11 April 1929).

What was demanded of Magdalene women, what was impressed upon them, was to totally relinquish themselves, to be alienated from their senses, to deny every aspect of themselves, and to become deferential. Magdalene Laundries operated with a highly concentrated formula that all Irish citizens were expected to subscribe to: A culture of conformity that prided obedience, chastity, moral purity, and a denial of pleasure. In the archives, time and again it was repeated that for the 'Catholic Social Ideal' to flourish, people must avoid a 'preoccupation with the self' (Houlihan 1954:28). Individual liberty and freedom were not to be protected, but must be 'checked and curbed in the common interest' of creating a Christian nation (DeValera 1937:10).

This was not just a top-down imposition then. There was clearly a collective understanding of these places, of what they meant. As John Banville wrote (2013), a system like this could happen only when the devotion to silence became the rule for all Irish people. ‘Never tell. Never acknowledge, that was the unspoken watchword. Everyone knew, but no one said’. For the Irish Free State to become “the Ireland we dreamed of”, everyone was expected to occupy a state of denial. Everyone was aware, from the family home, to the corner shop and to the corridors of power, that whatever you say, say nothing. It came to be that whole nation was engulfed in a subterfuge of a scale that was beyond anyone one institution to control.

That is how an institution that held more people than the prisons, where the public, government and businesses interacted with it via the laundry service, managed to slip into the realm of respectable silence. It explains how sisters, aunts, cousins, neighbours, and new born babies could disappear, never to be spoken of again. In a society such as Ireland in this period, so suffused with secrecy and denial, permeated by a perverse commitment to spiritual salvation and devotional discipline, we see how 155 women, and so many other likes them, ended their days at convents – forgotten and buried. The indifference to their death was not accidental. Their total erasure was complete.

## Conclusion

On the first day at a Magdalene Laundry, women and girls had their possessions, names and hair taken. In the days and weeks that followed, everything else was stripped from them. How do we make sense of this regime? In this paper I have argued that rather than discuss Magdalene Laundries as prisons, namely, sites of confinement that primarily contained women and girls and deprived them of their liberty, we should instead understand them as *sites of erasure*, designed to cause a loss of self.

The regiment they were subjected to was theological, not penological. It was a regime designed to achieve the mortification of the flesh and the elevation of the spirit. Magdalene Laundries had a distinctly moral mission that sets them apart from these others closed settings and forms of deep confinement.

Alongside the spiritual agenda, there were also structural and cultural forces that buttressed the continued use of Magdalene Laundries. Ireland was a new nation, the image of purity was embedded in the project of state formation. But purity requires cleansing. The women confined in Magdalene institutions were cut off from their lives and their identities, as well as their transgressions and their sins. What were Ireland’s social problems, were effectively wiped from the national image.

Why do we need to theorise past like this? At its most simple, the aim is to better ‘understand and document’ (Bosworth 2001) what were Magdalene laundries and why they operated as they did by listening to those who were there. These survivors spoke about suffering, they recalled the pain of being made to feel like dirt, of being blanked. They spoke of the pain of being abandoned, knowing that no one was coming for them, the pain that no one cared about their abuse. They told of the misery of spending decades having to act like their suffering had never happened, like they had never been incarcerated, humiliated, and debased. It was not only the pain of being confined or of gruelling labour. It was the pain of erasure. It was the anguish at having been effaced from the world.

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<sup>i</sup> All interviews are freely available here: <http://jfmresearch.com/home/oralhistoryproject/transcripts/survivors/> (O'Donnell, K., S. Pembroke and C. McGettrick. (2013) *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*. Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council). When I contacted Justice for Magdalenes about my project they asked that these interviews be used rather than circulating a call for another round of interviews. This is the best way to tell survivors' stories while also protecting them from being retraumatised by having to repeatedly retell their life story.

All interviews are allowed to be reproduced; however, rather than use the above academic citation after every quote, I instead just reference the woman by name only in the text so as not to interrupt their words. Most importantly, I direct people to the above link as it allows people immediate access to the women's full transcript.

These interviews amount to 2641 pages in total. I read these in-depth, one after another, twice, open coding the interviews each time using a grounded thematic approach that I have used elsewhere when working with oral history interviews (Brangan 2021).