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"You had to call them Mother": Patriarchy and Social Reproduction in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries

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Abstract

For over 200 years in Ireland, Catholic nuns oversaw the incarceration and forced labor of “fallen” women in asylums coined “Magdalene laundries.” The history and current condition of the Magdalene laundries is unfamiliar to most Americans, although small breakthrough stories have appeared in the news and other media. For this reason, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive background of their development from the 1760s to the present day. Existing scholarship on the Magdalene laundries leans heavily into the macro-societal forces that made this system of incarceration possible in Ireland, such as repressive sexual politics, nation-building ideology, and church-state collusion. Very few historians address the direct agents of oppression in the lives of penitent girls and women: the Catholic nuns. During my research I became interested in the question of how Catholic nuns could be active agents in an exploitative, abusive, and patriarchal carceral system for over two centuries. Rather than dismissing them as insane or helpless puppets of the church, I argue that we should approach the nuns as rational actors within their specific historic and social context. Utilizing coded evidence from oral testimonies of former penitents in the laundries, I show how nuns exerted power and control in the daily lives of Magdalene girls and women. I then employ the theories of W.E.B. Du Bois, Pierre Bourdieu, and Simone de Beauvoir to explain how patriarchy separates women into opposing classes, ingrains oppressive structures into their behaviors, and rewards them for their complicity and domination of other women. This preliminary exploration of the evidence and possible theoretical explanations forms a sound basis for future research.

Historical Background of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries

In 1767, Lady Arabelle Denny opened the first refuge for “fallen women” in Dublin, beginning a 300-year system of institutionalization for Ireland’s sexual deviants.¹ Called “Magdalene asylums” (referring to Mary Magdalene, a follower of Jesus falsely believed to be a prostitute), these rehabilitative workhouses were established by middle and upper-class female philanthropists like Denny in response to visible prostitution in Ireland’s urban centers. This was part of the larger philanthropic “rescue movement” enacted by affluent women to address social ills that Ireland’s weak welfare system failed to alleviate.² The asylums existed largely as rehabilitative institutions for prostitutes in hopes that women would re-enter society with upright character and employable skills. Women labored and received education during their brief stay of a few weeks or months. It is estimated that around 40% of women entered voluntarily, and they were also permitted to leave of their own free will at any time.³

Catholic religious orders began assuming control over Magdalene asylums during the 1830s.⁴ This shift began when the Irish Sisters of Charity took control of the Dublin General Magdalen Asylum in 1837 and relocated it to Donnybrook. Catholic nuns managed the day-to-day operations, with various orders such as the Sisters of Charity or Good Shepherd Sisters overseeing individual asylums. While the asylums drew some funding from religious patrons or community donations, their main source of income became the industrial laundries in which the Magdalene women would labor daily.⁵ Around this time, new rationale for entry

¹ James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 25.

² Clara Fischer, “Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalene Laundries and the Institutionalization of Female Transgression in Modern Ireland,” *Signs* 41, no. 4 (2016), 833; Smith, *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries*, 25.

³ Smith, *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid*, 28-30.

appears on convent records: having children out of wedlock, mental or physical handicaps, danger of “sexual temptation,” orphan status, criminal punishment, etc. Records show increasing numbers of women forcefully admitted by family members, clergy, legal courts, and orphanages rather than voluntary or coerced admittance as was previously common. The girls and women – often referred to as “penitents” – were provided no reason for their institutionalization, specific sentence lengths, or the date of mandated release. Often, they were not told they were being placed in a Magdalene institution at all or if they would ever be released. Physical, verbal, and psychological abuse at the hands of the nuns was also commonplace and perpetuated through institutional rules.⁶

By 1920, the asylums had transformed from short-term, rehabilitative institutions to carceral locations for Ireland’s sexual deviants. Prostitutes had all but disappeared from asylum censuses. Unwed mothers made up an estimated 70% of penitents in some institutions, while “preventative cases” – or women in danger of “falling” due to social or mental deficiencies – made up the rest.⁷ While the asylums continued to exist in name as rehabilitative institutions, they operated primarily as commercial laundries. Penitents labored from morning to night in industrial laundries where they would wash, iron, and fold the laundry of local people and uniforms from hospitals and prisons. Unpaid and unregulated, Magdalen women formed a large and easily exploitable class of workers. The church could collect the entire surplus of their labor, only having to cover basic subsistence costs of the women. The Good Shepherd Convent in Cork, for example, profited over \$100,000 from the laundry business in the 1950s and 60s⁸. Penitents had virtually no labor rights and were not protected by the Factory and Workshop Act

⁶ Ibid, 38.

⁷ Ibid, 42-46.

⁸ Ibid, 202.

of 1895 which protected manual laborers from “dangerous or injurious” work. Injuries, maiming, and death as a result from accidents or exhaustion were a regular part of life.⁹

While other European countries saw a decline in institutionalization in the 20th century, Irish institutions increased in numbers.¹⁰ In 1950, 1% of Ireland’s population was institutionalized. Rather than being shuttered by any legislation or public concern about the incarceration or exploitation of Magdalene women, the laundries largely ceased operation in the 1970s and 80s due to the widespread use of home washing machines.¹¹ Still, women were entering the laundries as late as 1980, and the last Magdalene laundry did not close until 1996.¹² After the discovery of a mass grave at one shuttered asylum, the Irish state began a formal investigation into the Magdalene laundry system. The 2013 McAleese Report found that the Irish state colluded in the operation of the institutions and had a responsibility for investigation and redress of the forced labor and unlawful incarceration of penitents. However, the state inquiry largely failed to address the question of the physical and psychological abuse suffered by the women in these institutions.¹³ Most records from the laundries are still in possession of the Catholic church, and researchers have limited access to archival material.

Since the 1990s, historians have done creative work with available materials to posit theoretical arguments about the creation and persistence of Magdalene laundries into the 20th century. Past scholarship has tended to focus on the “macro” forces that shaped the laundry system, such as Ireland’s repressive sexual politics, post-independence national identity, and the

⁹ Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries*, 38; Lizzie Seal and Maggie O’Neal, “Historical Spaces of Confinement: Magdalene Laundries” in *Imaginative Criminology* (Bristol: University of Bristol Press, 2019), 37-38.

¹⁰ Fischer, “Politics of Shame,” 829-830.

¹¹ Francis Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalene Asylums in Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 113.

¹² Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries*, xviii.

¹³ Fischer, “Politics of Shame,” 826.

moral authority of the Catholic church. While macro-analysis is useful, it does not reflect the full experience of the Magdalene asylums. In their daily lived experiences, the penitents likely did not concern themselves with the nebulous forces of religion, patriarchy, or national identity. Rather, their experience with domination and subjugation began at the hands of the nuns. The Magdalene laundries could not have operated without the labor and emotional investment of Catholic nuns. While large societal forces certainly shaped the laundries, it is essential to understand how meanings of power, control, and gender were built in the micro-interactions between penitents and nuns. This question has yet to be examined by scholars.

Research Question and Methods

The question I seek to answer is twofold: How did nuns exert power and control over penitents in the Magdalene laundries, and why did they do so? To answer this question, I first had to confront the problem of limited archival access to records and primary source documents produced by nuns. As a student researcher in the United States, my access is even more limited, as I cannot physically visit the available materials. Additionally, very few Magdalene records have been digitized. In surveying existing research on the Magdalene asylums, I found that many historians addressed this problem by relying on alternative historical sources such as media representations and survivor interviews.¹⁴ These materials, which capture how history is experienced, preserved, and transmitted through oral or visual means, are often referred to as

¹⁴ Two journal articles engage with Magdalene history by analyzing documentary, film, and narrative fictional representations of the laundries. See: Jessica Scarlata, "Washed Away: Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and Religious Incarceration" in *Rethinking Occupied Ireland: Gender and Incarceration in Contemporary Irish Film* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 201-249.; James M. Smith, "The Magdalene Sisters: Evidence, Testimony... Action?", *Signs* 32, No. 2 (Winter 2007): 431-458.

“cultural” memory as opposed to the “physical” memory contained in texts, records, or other documents a historian would traditionally use.¹⁵

While conducting online research, I encountered the Magdalene Oral History Project, a collection of oral histories which contained an unexpected wealth of knowledge. In 2012, Professor Katherine O’Donnell, with support from the Irish Research Council, began collecting oral testimonies of people involved in the Magdalene institutions. The project was largely an answer to the McAleese report which neglected survivor testimony or conducted interviews in abrasive ways. It contains 84 transcripts from former Magdalene women and girls, their relatives, activists, and key informants. Unfortunately, no oral testimonies from nuns were collected, although this is unsurprising given that nuns who were complicit with or active contributors to abuse in the laundries would not want to give testimony during legal proceedings.¹⁶

Oral histories pose some problems when utilized as historical sources. First, it can be difficult to regard testimonies as “factual accounts” because elapsed time and trauma can produce faulty memories. Many of the women interviewed were elderly and had significant psychological trauma from their time in the laundries. Second, some critics argue that the evidence in oral histories cannot be generalized because it is relevant only to that individual’s personal experience. Third, in the case of my specific question, there are no testimonies from nuns themselves. While all these concerns are well-founded, they should not prevent us from utilizing oral testimonies, which are some of the only available resources on this topic, to answer a critical question regarding the laundries.

¹⁵ Seal and O’Neal, “Historical Spaces of Confinement,” 52.

¹⁶ Justice for Magdalenes Research, “Magdalene Oral History Project,” Accessed March 30, 2022, <http://jfmresearch.com/home/oralhistoryproject/>.

I began my research with all these complications in mind and attempted to mitigate them by triangulating information found in oral histories with the existing research of historians who *do* have access to physical records.¹⁷ Claims found in testimonies could nearly always be backed up by evidence in existing journal articles or books. Additionally, I attempted to analyze a substantial sample in my limited time to make my results more generalizable. I analyzed ten oral histories (out of 30) from the following women: Nancy Shannon, Sinead, Bridget O'Donnell, Sara W, Martina Keogh, Mary May, Sarah, Philomena, Nora Lynch, and Catherine Whelan. I utilized "coding," an analytical method for qualitative data founded in the discipline of sociology, to assess oral histories in a systematic way.¹⁸ I read the interviews, identified recurring themes, developed specific dimensions and subcategories, and began assigning evidence into these categories. The coded data is described next.

Nun-Magdalene Relations in the Magdalene Oral History Project

The coded interviews provide insight into my first question: How did nuns exert power and control over penitents in the Magdalene laundries? The interviews yielded five categories to answer this question: control and subjugation, verbal abuse, physical abuse, hierarchy, and maternalism. These tactics were all seen as necessary for the moral reformation of the Magdalene women and demonstrate the ability of the nuns to exert extreme power over the lives of other women.

Control and Subjugation: Upon entrance to a Magdalene Laundry, penitents found their lives completely controlled by the nuns. This included the confiscation of possessions, wearing

¹⁷ Carol A.B. Warren and Tracy Xavia Karner, *Discovering Qualitative Methods: Ethnography, Interviews, Documents, and Images* (New York, NY: 2015), 237.

¹⁸ Warren and Karner, *Discovering Qualitative Methods*, 212; Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Sage Publications, 1996), 192-199.

uniforms, hair cutting, receiving new names, strict daily schedules, a rule of silence, forced labor, and information control. The abandonment of one's old life, including limited contact with friends and family, was regarded as necessary for spiritual rebirth to occur. Sinead, fifteen when she entered the Donnybrook asylum in Limerick, had her teddy bear and blue-jeans confiscated in exchange for a long skirt.¹⁹ The uniform of penitents was often drab, modest, and ill-fitting in order to prevent vanity and sexual desire.²⁰ Sara W. recalled the humiliation of being given new clothes, recalling:

“This one [nun] called Sheila came down, I still can see her, came down and she says, ‘get them clothes off you,’ my own clothes, ‘and put them on you’. Now, real stupid clothes, big long skirt and the knickers makes me laugh. I still think about the knickers, with no gusset in the knickers and two big legs (*laughs*). No gusset, that was to shame you, you see, no bras, a big red petticoat and a big long skirt over that, no, a big long dress over that, all buttoned up with a big collar, and that was it, that was my uniform, and a hat.”²¹

Nuns would forcibly cut penitent's hair upon entry or as a punishment. Bridget recalled that one nun would cut hair every Friday as punishment, saying, “... she'd just get scissors and just lump your hair... And then if you were really out of trouble... you were shaved like a boy. So I was mostly shaved like a boy all the time because I was always standing up to someone.”²² Hair is a visible marker of identity and femininity, and the threat of humiliation at having one's hair cut was used to keep penitents from disobeying. The imposition of new names also represented the penitents' “desire for a new moral identity” and their “re-christening.”²³ Nine

¹⁹ K. O'Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, “Oral History of Sinead,” *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 2.

²⁰ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 26.

²¹ K. O'Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, “Oral History of Bridget O'Donnell,” *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 39.

²² “Bridget O'Donnell,” 39.

²³ Smith, *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries*, 37.

women recalled having their names forcibly changed, although Nancy Shannon, Martina, and Nora Lynch refused to answer to them. Unable to cling to relationships, roles, or possessions to maintain a sense of identity, a name was often all a Magdalene woman had to connect her to her past life.

The “journey toward salvation” also required a repetitive, strict daily schedule.²⁴ Women would rise early in the morning (typically at 5am) to dress and pray. Until 9pm that night, the women cycled through intervals of laboring, prayer, and meals.²⁵ Sinead recalled, “I’d nothing to pass my time... all you’re doing there is laundry... it was like the army. Everything was regimental. A bell for this, a bell for that and that old carry-on.”²⁶ Recreation was not regular or to be expected, as it was regarded as the opportune time for penitents to develop “bad friendships” (often referring to lesbian relationships) or be enticed by the Devil.²⁷ Throughout the entire day, penitents were to remain silent.²⁸ Younger girls were especially discouraged from speaking with one another. Rather, they were told to pray during any moment of pause. Nora Lynch recalled, “You were up at six in the morning and you prayed from once you opened your eyes and then you prayed all the way down... every time you were walking anywhere... there’s Rosaries being said... *and* the Litanies being said, *and* the Stations of the Cross being said.”²⁹

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 33-34.

²⁶ “Sinead,” 12.

²⁷ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 231; K. O’Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, “Oral History of Sarah,” Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 6.

²⁸ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 24.

²⁹ K. O’Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, “Oral History of Nora Lynch,” Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 18.

Nuns were present during all activities, including laundry labor, family visits, meals, town shopping trips, and doctors' visits.³⁰ This surveillance made it impossible for penitents to seek help from clergy or common people. While Bridget was often left alone with a priest who visited the asylum and sought to help her, a nun threatened her life if she told him of the abuse she endured.³¹ Penitents noted that the nuns independently operated nearly all aspects of laundry life. Sarah recalled, "They ran to their liking and that's it. Very few outsiders, they allowed nobody to share the running with them."³² The lack of outside interference or regulation by the church and state allowed abuse to continue unchecked.

The nuns also engaged in information control. They often did not tell penitents where they were, why, or for how long.³³ Nuns read incoming and outgoing letters, often censoring or destroying them.³⁴ Very few laundries provided education to the penitents, as profit labor superseded rehabilitative education. Without education, penitents found it difficult to re-enter society and find regular jobs, often leading to their re-entry to the laundry or another institution. The interviewees observed that many older women who had been in the laundries nearly their entire lives had mental disabilities and engaged in child-like behavior due to stunted development.

³⁰ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 28-29; K. O'Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, "Oral History of Nancy Shannon," *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 15-16, 24, 54; K. O'Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, "Oral History of Philomena," *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 23; "Sarah," 22.

³¹ "Bridget O'Donnell," 37.

³² "Sarah," 9.

³³ K. O'Donnell, S. Pembroke, and C. McGettrick, 2013, "Oral History of Katherine Wheelan," *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*, Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, 7.

³⁴ "Sara W," 16.

Verbal Abuse: Verbal abuse in the Magdalene laundries often took the form of shaming and stigmatization. While Nora Lynch said she was never physically abused at a laundry, she recalled “psychological” torture at the hands of nuns.³⁵ Nuns used stigmatized labels for penitents such as bastard, slut, whore and devil. Penitents were told they were unfit to enter the outside world and would never be able to leave.³⁶ Katherine recalled that girls who disobeyed were humiliated in a public ceremony once a week when the head nun would read complaints about them and force them to kneel and apologize in front of the room.³⁷ Martina described her internalization of this shaming:

“... I always believed I wasn’t good enough for nobody and they told me that. They do tell you that, you’re inferior you believe that... Now I know different, but they always put that into that...you know, you’re nothing, you’re nobody, never speak to your betters... you do have that in you and then when you leave you kind of still carry that.”³⁸

Physical Abuse: Physical abuse was routine in Magdalen laundries. Beatings with keys, belts, and leather straps occurred frequently as punishment for purported disobedience such as speaking or refusal to work. Stubbornness, disobedience, and backtalk were all typical grounds for punishment, and “bad conduct” was the most listed reason for a penitent’s dismissal from a laundry.³⁹ For Martina, physical violence was used to “correct” her outright disobedience: “I’ve seen them holding women down and beating them. So you wouldn’t win with them, no matter what. So I learned to shut me mouth, and just to call them names under my breath behind their back.”⁴⁰ Sexual abuse was mentioned, although less frequently than physical abuse. Bridget

³⁵ “Nora Lynch,” 27.

³⁶ “Nancy Shannon,” 57; “Philomena,” 13, 29.

³⁷ “Katherine Wheelan,” 14.

³⁸ “Martina Keogh,” 70.

³⁹ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 60; “Nora Lynch,” 19.

⁴⁰ “Martina Keogh,” 40-41.

recalled nuns who sexually abused young girls in their offices or the communal showers. She also mentioned that priests would come into the laundry regularly, picking “the weakest of the weakest that knew no better” to sexually abuse.⁴¹ Again, the lack of state regulation allowed physical and sexual abuse to flourish unchecked.

Penitents were also locked in their rooms or cellars as punishment, undergoing starvation and isolation.⁴² Bridget was locked in a cellar for five months with limited food and water and endured regular beatings.⁴³ Penitents experienced illness and died at unusually high rates due to extreme physical stress from work, deficient diets, inability to seek medical services, and mental illness.⁴⁴ Martina noted that after a few years, the abuse became normalized: “I think I was after getting *used* to what was happening there, for the two years, I was... kind of getting used to the abuse that I began to think it was natural and normal, you know.”⁴⁵

Hierarchy: Nuns also maintained an internal hierarchy within the laundry both as a reward system and to create a class of penitents who would regulate their peers’ behavior. Penitents were told that through hard work, piety, and obedience, they could rise to the rank of a “Child of Mary” (this group was also referred to as the Legion of Mary, class of perseverance, or the auxiliaries).⁴⁶ Nora Lynch underwent the progression, wearing different colored rosettes as she advanced in status each month.⁴⁷ The group took vows, wore habits, and committed to spend the rest of their lives in the asylum, which many penitents perceived as a better alternative than

⁴¹ “Bridget O’Donnell,” 66, 84-85.

⁴² “Nancy Shannon,” 45.

⁴³ “Bridget O’Donnell,” 87-88.

⁴⁴ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 57.

⁴⁵ “Martina Keogh,” 41.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries*, 41; “Katherine Wheelan,” 10.

⁴⁷ “Nora Lynch” 24.

entering back into a life of poverty or destitution. This group was given authority to discipline other penitents; Philomena recalled that the nuns at one laundry never beat her and instead left punishment to the Children of Mary.⁴⁸ Still, Children of Mary could never become actual nuns, and the system operated more as an illusion of advancement while women remained imprisoned.

An informal class in the hierarchy was formed by women who been institutionalized for extended periods of time. These women were often mentally handicapped due to lack of education and psychological abuse experienced at the hands of the nuns. Even given the choice to leave, many of them remained because they considered the laundry as their home and the other penitents and nuns as their family.⁴⁹ These women often enforced the rules and punishments of the nuns, acting as a secondary dominating class. They would tell the nuns when younger girls disobeyed rules, refused to work, or broke silence, and they sometimes enacted violent punishment themselves.⁵⁰

Maternalism: The final recurring theme found in the oral testimonies was the development of a maternal relationship between nuns and penitents. Literature from the time often presented nuns as “mothers” to their penitent “children” who needed instruction, discipline, and care to rehabilitate them from their immoral, naïve state.⁵¹ Sinead recalled: “... we couldn’t call them ‘Sisters.’ You had to call them ‘Mother.’”⁵² Other women recalled this rule, noting that older women who had been institutionalized for long periods of time expressed adoration for the “Mother” nuns. Martina recalled, “Some of them were gone... that they would talk like babies

⁴⁸ “Philomena,” 26.

⁴⁹ “Sara W,” 29; “Mary May,” 15.

⁵⁰ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 130-133; “Bridget O’Donnell,” 48.

⁵¹ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 36, 43.

⁵² “Sinead,” 7.

you known, like with the nuns and, ‘mother... *oh, yes mother.*’ They would be all excited if the nun tapped them on the head.” Martina continued that “The nuns were lapping it up.”⁵³

Some women did perceive their mother-daughter relationships with the nuns as authentic. Mary May stated, “The nun that sent me up to Sean MacDermott Street... I don’t feel resentful or anything towards her, but I’d class her more as me mother because I supposed she was trying to be kind to me, but she was the only decent nun that we had...”⁵⁴ Many of the penitents had been separated from their own mothers at a young age or were orphans, meaning they had no maternal figures. It is logical that they would view kinder nuns as pseudo-mother figures.

Nuns engaged in these five tactics to control and subjugate the penitent girls and women in their care. When stories began to break in the media and news about the physical and psychological abuse in the Magdalene laundries, responses were varied. The media and existing scholarship have dismissed the nuns as either women driven insane by religious zeal or weak agents of a patriarchal church who could not speak out. Francis Finnegan, in the epilogue of her impressive account of the Magdalene laundries, argues that nuns should not be viewed as victims:

“Attempts have also been made to class the nuns as victims — to portray them as powerless instruments of a patriarchal rule. Pushed into the Church by their families, desexualized themselves... they performed an unenviable task with reluctance, and as best they could. All this is unconvincing. Their own fanatical commitment, the distasteful relish with which they carried out their activities, their determination to inflict their rule on others... counter such arguments...”⁵⁵

It is true that the nuns *were* committed to their roles in the laundries and often displayed “relish” in carrying out tactics of control. However, I disagree with Fisher’s dismissal of the nuns

⁵³ “Martina Keogh,” 28, 95.

⁵⁴ “Mary May,” 32.

⁵⁵ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 243-244.

as victims of a patriarchal church, state, and national culture. Can both these portrayals hold true? Can the nuns be both victims of patriarchy and its most dedicated enforcers? The monolithic images of the “victimized” vs “evil” nuns are neither helpful nor accurate to history. The behavior of the nuns on such a wide geographic scale, enduring for over two centuries, could not have been the product of insanity. While the nuns, certainly, must be held accountable for the physical and psychological violence they enacted on other women, I also seek to understand what material and ideological conditions created an environment where nuns felt empowered and rewarded by this domination. The data from the Magdalene testimonies can be illuminated when we approach the nuns as rational actors within their specific social and historical context.

I established this research orientation after encountering a passage in Bridget O’Donnell’s transcript where a nun named Sister Aloysius tries to explain to Bridget what life was like for many nuns. After Bridget was beaten by a nun, the Sister attempted to console her by telling her that the nun was “just hammering another nail down, her problems, she couldn’t handle them and she put them out on children.”⁵⁶ She continued,

“The rest were all in there through...forced into an order, you know, through parents... you were above society when you had a sister or a brother that entered the order and a nun that entered the order. Everybody bowed to the family, ‘good morning, good morning, wonderful to hear about your daughter getting to be a nun.’

But they were forced in. They weren’t telling the people the truth that they were forced in, you know... they were not happy people. They weren’t happy people. They were sad people. That’s why they were angry. They were angry with everybody.’ And then she says, ‘If they got the job through the orphanages or the laundries, that’s where they put their anger out. It’s because what they lost out on...

... Everyone thought that we were there because we were in there because the name of Christ. We weren’t. A lot of them did not go in there,’ she said, ‘in the name of... they went in there because their parents forced them in.’ And she said a good few of them had

⁵⁶ “Bridget O’Donnell,” 80.

babies, you know, but they came from a middle-class family, they wouldn't have come from the poor."⁵⁷

It was this passage that sparked my interest in investigating what life was like for Irish nuns in the 19th and 20th century. Perhaps the way nuns entered convents and how their lives operated within them were significant to understanding how they could exact such exploitation and abuse upon other women in the laundries.

Searching for Logic: Historically Situating Nun Behavior

I have long been fascinated by historical cases where women act as agents of patriarchy in the oppression of other women. Rather than being united by common concerns of their gender, nuns and penitents were pitted against each other as moral vs. immoral, holy vs. sinful, motherlike vs. childlike. By examining why women entered religious orders and how life operated in Irish convents, we can begin to answer the second question of *why* nuns were complicit with and active participants in the oppressive Magdalene laundry system.

The Condition of Irish Nuns in the 19th and 20th Century

Catholic convents were uncommon in Ireland due to anti-Catholic penal legislation until 1629 when the first was established by a small group of nuns in Dublin. Small female religious communities continued to establish themselves, although few flourished until the mid-1800s when laws prohibiting women from living together in religious communities were repealed.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ "Bridget O'Donnell," 82-83.

⁵⁸ Mary O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 158-159; Mary Peckam Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 6.

The number of nuns in Ireland increased rapidly from 122 in 1800 to 8,031 in 1901.⁵⁹ While nuns originally came from noble or wealthy families, a demographic shift occurred as increasing numbers of lower-middle-class women entered convents. This is both due to the general economic decline and proliferation of convents in poorer rural areas after the famine.⁶⁰ At the beginning of the 20th century, there were 8,000 nuns and 368 convents in Ireland.⁶¹ As Sister Aloysius indicated, why these women entered religious life – whether they were forced or chose to join – provides insight into their treatment of penitents in the laundries.

Economic Opportunity: While careers outside of domestic life were strictly limited for Irish women, becoming a nun was one of few professional options that allowed for social mobility. Nuns were partially accepted as part of Ireland’s “professional class,” as they influenced health, education, and welfare due to the importance of Catholicism in Irish society. Religious life also afforded leadership development, education, and another avenue for women to engage in productive labor outside of the role of homemaker and mother.⁶²

Convent life was also seen as a viable option for unemployed women or families too poor to provide dowries for a suitable marriage.⁶³ The Great Famine caused large-scale economic and demographic upheaval, leading to an increase in “underemployment, destitution, and disease” for Irish women. Women sought physical and economic safety in convent life as an alternative to unemployment and poverty.⁶⁴ A drop in agricultural productivity and decreased availability of

⁵⁹ Deirdre Raftery, “Rebels with a cause: obedience, resistance and convent life, 1800-1940,” *History of Education* 42, no. 6 (2013): 731.

⁶⁰ Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 36-37; Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 89.

⁶¹ Diarmaid Ferriter, “Cartoon history of nuns in Ireland needs to be challenged,” *The Irish Times*, 2013, Accessed April 4, 2022.

⁶² Raftery, “Rebels with a cause,” 735; Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 38, 74-77.

⁶³ O’Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 158.

⁶⁴ Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, 28-29.

eligible bachelors in the 1900s meant that more women remained unmarried. Rather than become “spinsters” – a sign of failure to be a true Irish wife and mother – women maintained dignity by choosing to become nuns.⁶⁵

Status and National Identity: Catholicism pervaded all aspects of Irish life in the post-independence period, creating a “highly charged, emotional Catholicism” which drew many women to life within religious orders. Dedicating one's life to the church reflected the ideals of Catholicism and Irish national identity. Nuns enjoyed a higher status than most women, and to enter into the church produced privilege and status.⁶⁶ Catholic publications heralded nuns as “consecrated to God” and “the elite of the Christian army,” thus indicating an acceptance and enthusiasm for women in religious life. Additionally, families could increase their status by having daughters or sisters enter religious life.⁶⁷ Indeed, Sister Aloysius referred to this, as Bridget recalled her say, “...you were above society when you had a sister or a brother that entered the order and a nun that entered the order... Everybody bowed to the family, ‘good morning, good morning, wonderful to hear about your daughter getting to be a nun.’”⁶⁸

Spirituality, Autonomy, and Freedom: In her interviews with over a dozen Irish nuns, Yvonne McKenna identified other reasons that women entered religious life. Many cited that they had a “desire for adventure” which they could pursue through missionary projects. This life of mobility and freedom was contrasted with the immobile, restricted lives of domestic mothers and wives. Religious life was also regarded as superior to other life paths; it was defined by purity, perfection, and responsibility. Many Irish women felt “called” to a religious vocation and

⁶⁵ Yvonne McKenna, “Entering Religious Life, Claiming Subjectivity: Irish nuns, 1930s-1960s,” *Women's History Review* 15, no. 2 (2006).

⁶⁶ McKenna, “Entering Religious Life”; Magray, *The Transforming power of Nuns*, 74.

⁶⁷ Raftery, “Rebels with a cause,” 733-735; Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 38, 74-77.

⁶⁸ “Bridget O'Donnell,” 82.

felt true spiritual fulfillment through life as a nun.⁶⁹ Other sources note that women entered in acts of rebellion against unwanted engagements, abusive family members, or social stigmatization. Some women sought reprieve from the demanding roles of wife and mother, although many such candidates were turned away and encouraged to fulfill their familial obligations.⁷⁰ Sister Aloysius references middle-class women who entered after having babies, likely referring to higher-status women who were hidden in convents by their families after having children out of wedlock. It is theorized that some women even joined with their female intimate partners to maintain “particular friendships” in a female-dominated space.⁷¹

Overall, religious life was often regarded as a positive economic and spiritual alternative to “typical” life, though women entered it for a multitude of reasons. Many women did not enter voluntarily, or their entry was coerced by economic and social forces.

Convent Initiation and Life

After a woman was attracted to convent life for one of the aforementioned reasons, she would become a postulant and live in the convent for a trial period of a few months to a year. Once a postulant was officially received as a novitiate, she would adopt a new name and don the religious “habit,” the commonly recognizable uniform of nuns.⁷² Rejection of one’s old life, human desires, and any independent identity was expected. A woman would surrender her personal property as both a commitment to poverty and abandonment of a personal identity.⁷³

Novitiates, during their period of training, would “internalize” the spiritual cause of the convent, learn to submit to the Mother Superior, and accept their role as a subordinate worker to

⁶⁹ Mckenna, “Entering Religious Life.”

⁷⁰ Raftery, “Rebels with a cause,” 734-735; Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 38.

⁷¹ Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 62-64.

⁷² Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, 69.

⁷³ Raftery, “Rebels with a cause,” 736; Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, 70.

the larger mission of the church and God.⁷⁴ Every aspect of their day was strictly managed between periods of teaching, prayer, and labor. A Novice Mistress would oversee the young novitiates and constantly scrutinize their behavior for disobedience or sinful leanings. When novitiates or nuns disobeyed, they faced “exhortations” wherein a nun or the Superior would admonish their behavior and remind them of expected conduct. Novitiates were taught their humiliation and suffering under the direction of the Superior brought them closer to God. Once a novitiate became a nun, she would take a Vow of Obedience which required humility and submission to the Superior.⁷⁵ Nuns would also commit to chastity, vowing to disengage from sexuality and embrace the pure character of Mother Mary. Orders observed different rules about movement and “enclosure,” with some nuns required to stay inside the convent except for in the case of illness or emergency and others allowed to leave their diocese with papal permission.⁷⁶ The relationship between nuns and their Superior “mothers” was especially important to convent life. Entering novitiates gave the Superior an account of their life and reported any “weaknesses” the mother should know in order to assist her on her spiritual journey. The novice's “conscience” was often “examined” by the Superior for signs of weakness or insubordination, thus creating an intimate relationship of both accountability and judgment. Historian Mary Magray notes that “Mother superiors grounded their authority as mediators in religious holiness.” Their ability to force obedience came not from their own will, but as a holy directive by God, thus making it impossible to challenge. Even while no familial relationship existed, the

⁷⁴ Raftery, “Rebels with a cause,” 731.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 738-742.

⁷⁶ Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, 74-78; Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 88.

language of motherhood was applied to posit Superiors as “mothers” with authority over spiritual “daughters” without.⁷⁷

As stated earlier, nuns enjoyed a degree of power and privilege in Ireland that most women would not access. They often found community, spiritual fulfillment, and rewarding labor in convents. However, women also had to take vows to abandon their old lives and disconnect, both physically and emotionally, from their past family and friends. Isolation from society and its typical goals for women – childrearing, family life, housekeeping – could have produced considerable alienation for some women. It was not possible for nuns to participate in ideal Irish womanhood, as they could be neither wife nor mother. Girls and women often faced enormous social pressure to enter convents, and it could be difficult to adhere to vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity. Nuns, then, experienced a spectrum of fulfillment and alienation in convent life.⁷⁸

Searching for Logic: Applications of Sociological Theory

How can we explain the physical and psychological violence enacted on one group of women by another? Both groups were victimized by patriarchy and experienced economic insecurity, limited roles for fulfillment outside of domestic life, and impossible standards of sexual purity. Yet, they were not united. Rather, nuns actively engaged in the oppression of penitent girls and women. In order to understand this phenomenon, I utilize theories from three prominent sociological thinkers. First, I engage with W.E.B. Du Bois to examine how patriarchy drives a wedge between women, separating them into opposing classes who enact each other’s

⁷⁷ Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 47-49.

⁷⁸ Ferriter, “Cartoon history”; Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns*, 51; McKenna, “Entering Religious Life.”

oppression. Next, through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, I explore how nuns reproduced their own experiences in convent life to the extreme in the structures of the laundries. Finally, I examine the psychological and metaphysical rewards the nuns reaped from their participation in the Magdalene system by utilizing Du Bois' psychological wages and Simone de Beauvoir's rewards of complicity.

Alienation and The Wedge: The work of W.E.B. Du Bois is useful for examining how a group which should objectively be united because of their material oppression – such as the working class or women – is alienated by manufactured ideologies like racial or religious superiority. While Marxist theory posits that the working class should be united by their common oppression by the bourgeoisie, Du Bois counters that white elites drove a “wedge” between black and white workers in America by manufacturing an ideology of racial superiority which superseded class interests. Even while white workers remained impoverished and economically exploited like their black counterparts, racist ideology from white media and education communicated that they were physically, psychologically, and morally superior. Rather than turning on their elite oppressors, white workers enacted violence on black workers who they perceived as their enemies. The wedge of race alienated workers from each other, thus the working class became divided and engaged in their own oppression.⁷⁹

A similar ideological wedge divided nuns and penitents. The patriarchal church and state bestowed privilege on women who entered religious life and differentiated them from their “fallen” sisters. Nuns were consistently characterized as wholly different beings from penitents: motherly, innocent, and pure rather than childlike, sinful, and polluted. Nun's sexual superiority was especially important, as their vows of chastity and holy virginity was contrasted against the

⁷⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), 572-574; W.E.B. Du Bois, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” *The Crisis* 40, no. 5 (1933): 103-104, 118.

sexual deviance of penitents who may have engaged in prostitution or had children out of wedlock. The verbal abuse of penitents demonstrates the internalization and enactment of this “wedge” as nuns consistently referred to penitents as whores, sluts, and bastards. Convinced that they had more in common with religious and patriarchal elites rather than their own gender, nuns engaged in the oppression of women of lower status. With women divided and oppressing each other, the religious patriarchy could more easily control them.⁸⁰

Habitus and Social Reproduction: Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* and social reproduction provides insight into how oppressive structures are reproduced over time. Bourdieu theorized that people cultivate different forms of “cultural capital” such as behaviors, traditions, skills, material possessions, and dispositions that reflect and create their social class.⁸¹ For example, Irish Catholic orders socialized their nuns to hold deep beliefs about sexual purity, obedience to authority, and strong work ethic. This cultural capital, which forms a group identity, becomes *habitus* – the embodied practice of the habits and dispositions developed throughout one’s life. For nuns, these dispositions manifested in strict daily schedules, obedience to their Mother Superiors, and vows of chastity. These ideas and behaviors became integral parts of their identities as nuns.

Often, *habitus* is so ingrained in one’s unconscious psyche and worldview that it is perceived as natural and inherent rather than a social construct.⁸² Nuns were characterized as naturally holy, humble, and sexually pure. This essentialist attitude allows for the reproduction of inequality, as it assumes some people are naturally dispositioned to particular behaviors or places

⁸⁰ Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, 155.

⁸¹ Pierre Bourdieu, “Structures, Habitus, Practice” from *The Logic of Practice* in *Contemporary Sociological Theory* ed. Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff, and Indermohan Virk (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 346, 353.

⁸² *Ibid*, 346.

in society while others are not. Nuns were believed to be predisposed to obedience and purity while their penitent “children” are destined to vice, disobedience, and immorality. Thus, *habitus* transforms “instituted difference into natural distinction... durably inscribed in the body and in belief.”⁸³ The *habitus* perpetuates the past into the future as practices become embodied and transformed into structures. The rules and routines that nuns internalized during their periods as novitiates and in convents was reproduced to the extreme in their oversight of the Magdalene laundries.

There are clear parallels between the daily routines of the penitents in the laundries and the nuns in their convents. Both groups engaged in early rising followed by cycles of prayer, laboring, and meals. While nuns enjoyed more leisure time, their lives were still characterized by a commitment to labor as a path to moral absolution and salvation. Catholic ideology posited forced labor as a way to discipline “body and soul through work to absolve sins.”⁸⁴ Forced starvation and isolation were extreme versions of Christian practices of fasting and seclusion which religious orders often engaged in. The harsh daily lives and treatment of penitents likely seemed rational, or perhaps even necessary, to nuns. Nora Lynch recalled a nun telling her that she was being sent to a laundry “to be trained to behave yourself... I have got to teach you how to become of good character.”⁸⁵ All labor, prayer, and punishment fell under the umbrella of “training,” and Nora was constantly reminded that obedience and suffering were for her own spiritual and moral development. Novitiates, too, were socialized early in their initiation to the convents that their humility and physical suffering served the larger end of spiritual fulfillment.

⁸³ Ibid, 351.

⁸⁴ Seal and O’Neal, “Historical Spaces of Confinement,” 38.

⁸⁵ “Nora Lynch,” 14, 22.

The creation of mother-daughter relationships and internal hierarchies in the Magdalene laundries also reflects existing structures in convents. Novitiates and nuns, separated from their own families, were taught to find admire, respect, and find comfort in their “Mother” Superiors. This mother-daughter relationship was reproduced in the laundries, as nuns demanded that subordinate penitents in their care also respect them as their “Mothers.” Convents also had internal hierarchies as women were separated into different classes based on their experience, piety, and dedication to upward movement in the order. The nuns recreated this mobility system in the Children of Mary program they operated within the laundries. The parallels between convent and laundry life become obvious when one has a comprehensive understanding of both. The nuns, both consciously and unconsciously, reproduced the rules and structures they were familiar with when operating the laundries.

Psychological Wages of Complicity: Finally, sociologically theory can explain how nuns benefitted from their participation in the laundry system. Here, the theories of Du Bois and Simone de Beauvoir work together to explain how nuns reaped a psychological wage from their domination of penitents. Du Bois posited that white workers were paid a “psychological wage” by white elites even while their material conditions remained the same. They had the right to vote, access to better schools, and were governed by more lenient laws – all privileges denied to black workers. In the same way, the patriarchal church and state offered privileges to nuns that gave them superiority over penitents. They had access to education, engaged in productive labor and reform work, and possessed moral authority. These privileges produced a sense of superiority over penitents, even while both groups were still economically and sexually subordinated by a male-dominated social structure.

Simone de Beauvoir examined this same idea when investigating why women were complicit in their own oppression and the oppression of other women. She noted,

“To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal – this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction: Women as Other” in *The Second Sex* (Random House, 1949); See also: Charlotte Knowles, “Beauvoir on Women’s Complicity in Their Own Unfreedom,” *Hypatia* 34, no. 2 (2019): 242-265.

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de Beauvoir references the “advantages conferred upon them by their alliance” and states that they are both material and metaphysical. Alliance with the patriarchal church ensured the material rewards of economic and physical security for nuns, especially those coming from lower-class or abusive backgrounds. Perhaps more significantly, nuns reaped the “metaphysical”

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or psychological rewards of complicity. Their identities and self-worth were validated by the church and state, further contributing to their sense of superiority over penitent women. Thus, these psychological rewards produced an environment where nuns felt validated and empowered by their domination of “fallen” women. Nuns also reaped the psychological wage of fulfilling a pseudo-maternal role that was so essential to Irish womanhood by demanding penitents call them “mother.”

This sense of empowerment may also assist in our understanding of the exertion of physical control and violence by nuns. Violence, when utilized by women, was typically seen as a deviant act. Gender norms required that women were mild, physically weak, and controlled their tempers. Yet, women were given specific power to use corporal punishment as a form of behavior correction for children. The nuns were able to extend this power for “corrective” beatings against their penitent “children.” With this justification, nuns could exert physical power over the women under their control. Perhaps this violence functioned as a sort of psychological catharsis and outlet for frustration. As seen in the testimony of Sister Aloysius, many nuns were deeply upset with their lives in the convents. Left unaddressed, mental strain can turn to physical violence, as some nuns may have sought an outlet for their own unhappiness in punishing the women under their control.

Conclusions

Ireland’s Magdalene laundries provide a fertile ground for historical and sociological explorations of incarceration, power, religion, gender, and sexuality. While past research has focused on explaining the existence of the laundry system through macro-societal forces, I find equal importance in the small-scale interactions that occurred daily in the asylums. These

interactions, founded in the motivations and experiences of the Irish nuns, were essential to the operation and continued existence of the laundries into the 20th century. Rather than dismissing the nuns as insane or victimized, a thorough understanding of the condition of Irish women over the past three centuries illuminates their behavior and domination of Magdalene women. With a more nuanced perspective, we can deconstruct the caricature of the “evil” nun and replace it with an honest and useful portrait. Perhaps once this has been achieved, we can truly make steps to address the ways in which patriarchy engages women in their own oppression. Still, without the testimonies of the nuns – many of whom are aging or have already passed – it will be difficult to answer this question. Future researchers will likely have to engage with alternative sources and continue to “do” Magdalene history in creative and innovative ways.

