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Ireland?s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation?s Architecture of Containment

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James M. Smith?s book, *Ireland?s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation?s Architecture of Containment* (2007) fills a significant gap in research about the Magdalen laundries and their impact on Irish society. Frances Finnegan?s *Do Penance or Perish* (2001) has also tackled the subject, but her study is confined to the Good Shepherd asylums that operated in Ireland. As well being an overview of laundries run by various religious orders, Smith?s monograph also positions the Magdalen laundries within a variety of discourses that overlap and interconnect, including religion, politics, sexuality and the arts.

Smith divides his book into two main sections. The first concerns the background to the laundries and is broken up into two chapters that deal with the 19th and 20th centuries respectively. A further four chapters make up the second section of the book, which analyses artistic representations of the laundries in art, film and drama. As most of the artistic representations that Smith discusses offer retrospective perspectives on these institutions the end result is a roughly chronological structure. In his preface, Smith sets out the three primary objectives of this account and analysis of the laundries. He wishes to portray the history of these institutions as intimately connected with the politics of the nation state, to evaluate the recent artistic representations of them, and to extend a challenge to the nation to acknowledge responsibility and proffer redress.

The author rejects the assumption that this book can be called a history of the asylums. Indeed, a central argument in the book and one that is largely justified by its second section is that ?the Magdalen laundry exists in the public mind chiefly at the level of *story* (cultural representation and survivor testimony) rather than history (archival records and documentation)? (p. xvi-xvii). The reason for this state of affairs is the refusal of religious orders to open their archives for scholarly research. As a result of this refusal, many factual ambiguities remain about the numbers and origins of Magdalen inmates after 1900 as well as the duration of their stays. Smith?s argument in relation to the impossibility of comprehensive scholarly research in this area is well-founded and convincingly argued. However, it does create ambiguities in the categorisation of this research; ambiguities which pose questions about how this book should be analysed and evaluated. If it is not a history, should it be judged as literary criticism or as cultural studies? In fact it relates to all of these categories. Smith makes the limitations of his research work to his advantage, using the factual information available about the laundries and allowing it to reverberate with political, legislative and social history over two centuries, showing that the laundries were situated at the nexus of a variety of social structures in Ireland, and validating his multi-disciplinary perspective. It emerges from Smith?s study that not only do these structures shed light on the laundries, but that an understanding of the laundries also provides insights into Irish society and the creation of its identity. Such cross-pollination is the hallmark of innovative multi-disciplinary research.

The introduction consists of a discussion of the Carrigan Report (1931). This report was compiled by the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts and Juvenile Prostitution, which played a significant role in the creation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1935). The committee reported a general fall in morality that was linked to an increase in the number of children born out of wedlock and uncovered evidence of sexual crimes committed against women and children (p. 6). The report formed an unsavoury picture that contradicted the prevailing image of the fledgling Irish State, which meant that the report?s findings were regarded as unsuitable for public dissemination. However, the state did take legislative action on the basis of this report. The Criminal Law Amendment Bill placed a total ban on contraception, replacing the previous legislation that allowed for ?exceptional circumstances? (p. 9). The separate Dance Halls Bill was also published as a bastion against one of the perceived sites of vice and immorality. Smith argues that ?the Carrigan Report?s political reception ? first the suppression of the report, then the legislative response ? established a precedent for church-state management of sociosexual controversies, proscribing visible manifestations of ?sexual immorality? while failing to address, or choosing to ignore, the social realities attending them? (p. 4). Smith is correct to give particular attention to this committee and the bills and acts that it influenced. Although the reaction to and effects of the Carrigan committee?s work deserves particular focus, placing it before the chapter on the 19th century creates a rupture in the chronology of the book that might have been avoided had it been placed within the second chapter on the 20th century. More specific information on the Dance Halls Act and how it changed the extant circumstances of dance halls around the country would add another useful dimension to Smith?s overview of Irish society at this time.

The first Magdalen asylum opened in 1767 on Leeson Street in Dublin. The institutions took their name from the biblical Mary Magdalen, for the example of atonement and spiritual renewal she showed. Initially at least, they were run by lay-women. Smith notes, as others have, that such institutions were not exclusively Catholic. However, the Catholic institutions are notable for their longevity, the final laundry closing only in the 1990s. The author aligns the increasing involvement of religious orders in such asylums from the 1840s

onwards with a rise in their participation in various institutions including orphanages and homes from the elderly and mentally ill. His meticulous research and his consultation of a wide variety of source material unearths a number of interesting facts. Before 1900, approximately 40% of inmates volunteered to enter these institutions, and many appeared to leave and re-enter with relative ease. By the end of the century, it is suggested that inmates were staying for longer periods. These women appeared to be thought of as falling into one of two groups ? ?fallen? women and women who entered as a ?preventative? measure: those who were charged with moral vice and those who were in danger of this. Smith analyses the psychology of the hierarchies within the asylum very well. He observes how institutions further distinguished the inmates by identifying what stage they were at in relation to salvation, and cites documentary evidence for these stages being marked by differences in attire. Thus, he notes ?Reaching death in a state of spiritual grace, rather than securing physical freedom, provides the rational for this structure? (p. 40).

It is in the second chapter on the 20th century that Smith fully develops his argument about Ireland?s ?architecture of containment? (p. 46). Smith reveals that the state?s reliance on the Church for the provision of institutionalised care led to a two-tiered system being put in place. Expectant mothers who were not married often entered into mother and baby homes. On giving birth, the mother might be sent to a Magdalen asylum and the baby to an industrial school. Quoting from an interview with the Sisters of Mercy in the Galway Magdalen asylum in the 1950s, Smith draws attention to the alarming phenomenon of young women being transferred from an industrial school to a Magdalen asylum, as a ?preventative? measure against impurity. Such transferrals are justified by the Sister in question because the young women are regarded as ?backward? and needing ?special care? (p. 44). Scathing of the state?s role in these institutions, an ?active agent and willing partner? (p. 51), Smith points out how it ignored its responsibility to citizens by failing to intervene legislatively or financially, not even providing capitation grants for the inmates, and continuing to regard the asylums as private, charitable institutions in which it had no role to play. Moreover, the state ceased contributing to the upkeep of industrial school pupils at 16 and to transfer them beyond such schools to another institution was an illegal practice, of which, Smith asserts, the Department of Education was always aware (p. 73).

The same chapter recounts shocking stories about mothers who committed infanticide during this period, and the outrageous response of the medical and legal systems, which is characterized by the same sexism and suppression as is the running of the laundries. Young women who were remanded in custody were another group who found themselves subjected to Magdalen asylums. Rather than send such women to prison, The Criminal Justice Act allowed them to be sent to an asylum. Once again, Smith points out the sexist double standard at play. It had been suggested that young men on remand should be sent to St. Patrick?s institution beside Mountjoy prison, a suggestion that was rejected because it would have been impossible to separate them from convicted prisoners. Although this was also the case in St. Mary?s Magdalen asylum, no such objection was raised (p. 67). This asylum on Sean MacDermot Street became a remand home for young women, with allusions to its previous existence as a Magdalen laundry tellingly absent from official records.

Drawing on Richard Kearney, Mary Robinson and Paul Riceour, Smith defines the 1990s as a period in which a ?new national narrative? is created, which ?reinscribes those victimized by Ireland?s official story? (p. 89). In the second section of the book, Smith goes on to assess the various art forms that contributed to this new narrative in detail. He begins with Patricia Burke Brogan?s play *Eclipsed* (1992), which is based on the author?s personal experience in the 1960s and deals also, to a lesser extent, with her later play *Stained Glass at Samhain* (2002). Smith regards Burke?s play as the template for other Magdalen narratives, establishing tropes common in other representations (p. 92) although these tropes are not explicitly identified. *Eclipsed* stages its central dramatic conflict between two nuns: Mother Victoria and Sister Virginia. Victoria upholds the patriarchal order and observes a strict hierarchical authority, preaching a doctrine of ?blind obedience? (p. 100). Virginia, on the other hand, feels sorry for the inmates, questions the goodness of her work, and vainly agitates for better conditions for the inmates. The character Rosa leads the audience on their journey into the asylum, as an adoptee in search of information about her biological parents, while Nellie-Nora represents those who became institutionalised and detached from the outside

world. According to Smith, identifying with Rosa?s modern perspective means that the audience must ?acknowledge their complicity in effecting and then effacing this aspect of the nation?s history? (p. 96). In Smith?s view, the four documentaries that have dealt with Magdalen laundries also demand that their audiences acknowledge and redress the injustices of the past. *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1994), the Channel 4 production, will be familiar to many Irish readers. Smith also sheds light on a further three documentaries: *Washing Away the Stain* (1993), *Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen* (1998) and the *60 Minutes* programme ?The Magdalen Laundries? (1999). Admitting bafflement as to why Irish television neither made nor aired any of these documentaries, despite dealing with other Church-state scandals in documentary mode, such as industrial schools, Smith provides an enlightening analysis of how these four documentaries are structured, produced and presented, and the interpretive affects of these decisions.

In common with Peter Mullan?s film *The Magdalene Sisters*, Smith criticizes the media?s response to these documentaries which ?ignore[s] the larger social structures that simultaneously victimized many of Ireland?s female religious? (p. 132). Smith?s assessment of Mullan?s film situates it in relation to the available historical evidence about the Magdalen laundries and also the contemporary context of its reception. This context was framed by the clerical sexual abuse scandals in Europe and America. In Ireland, a year after the film premiered, it was revealed that in 1993, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, who ran the High Park Magdalen Asylum, received a licence to exhume bodies of inmates that had been anonymously buried. 133 remains were licensed: 155 remains were exhumed, cremated and reburied. Smith?s analysis of *The Magdalene Sisters* assesses the manner in which Mullan draws on history by using several cultural artefacts in the film, such as archival footage and a photograph, and goes on to analyse its uneasy relationship to fact and fiction concluding that ?his film reveals how both communities of women ? the sinners and the saintly ? operate in relation to external national, societal, and familial forces? (p. 158).

The final chapter of Smith?s book deals with visual representations of the Magdalen laundries: Diane Fenster?s art installation, Gerard Mannix Flynn?s extallation and the memoral plaque in Dublin?s St. Stephen?s Green, the last two going some small way towards filling the need for ?official commemorations, appropriate monuments and memorials? (p. 184). In the preface to this book, Smith candidly relates how difficult it is to ?separate academic detachment and personal indignation? (p. xix). In *Ireland?s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation?s Architecture of Containment* he achieves a balance between these often conflicting forces. Smith?s book is scholarly in its research and writing, and offers many insights in to the Magdalen asylums and their cultural representations. His indignation is restrained, and he allows the facts to speak for themselves. The topic of this book is fascinating, its execution is excellent, and its contribution to Ireland?s social and cultural history is essential. In the overall conclusion to the book, Smith relates several specific actions which should be taken to provide redress to the inmates of Magdalen asylums. These include an apology from the state; an apology from the religious orders involved (only the Sisters of Mercy has so far comprehensively apologised) and the ability to apply to the Residential Institutions Redress Board (impossible because the institutions are regarded as ?private?). Finally, he requests the opening of the religious orders? archival records. It is only then that the work of history in relation to the Magdalen laundries, which has made significant progress in this book, can finally be completed.

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