BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

ISSN: 2514–0612

Journal homepage: http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE

Person, Place and Culture: An Irish Catholic Obituary

Author(s): Patrick Quinlan

Email: pquinl01@student.bbk.ac.uk

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (April 2022), pp. 138–146.

URL: http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/299

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v6i1.299

© Patrick Quinlan

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Brief Encounters is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE.

In association with

CHASE
Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England

Arts & Humanities Research Council

Person, Place and Culture: An Irish Catholic Obituary

Patrick Quinlan

We didn't speak about her often, but in her own discreet way, she was always there. The crocheted cushion covers on our kitchen chairs, the knitted teddies that populated the stuffed menagerie of my childhood. All, the fruit of long evenings spent in companionable silence with her 'sisters', mostly wielding needles singly or in pairs; the more adventurous mastering the patient art of in-vitro ship-building.

I remember our first meeting. Released briefly for a rare family visit, I stood by as my grandmother greeted her on the platform, deafened by the reversing manoeuvre of the filthy orange locomotive, an irrational relic of a rationalised rail network. Later, in the dimly lit comfort of my grandmother's good room—her own childhood home-place—I ventured to ask about herself. Her home of six decades was a refuge for 'fallen women.' There had once been a laundry, an orphanage and a school too, but all were closed now.[1] That sounded interesting, but it was the unfamiliar expression, 'fallen women' that caught my attention. She answered matter-of-factly and without hesitation: a fallen woman was one whose sin had caused her to fall from God's favour but who, with prayer and good work, could be restored to His grace. The explanation seemed reasonable to my seven-year-old brain, where it would lodge, un-retrieved, for twenty years. It was September 1993, around midday. We prayed the Angelus together, her version sounding strangely archaic to my post-Vatican II ears.

At our next encounter, five years later, she was confined to bed in her sparsely furnished little room. Those dexterous hands no longer oscillated to the flash of needles, but they remained strong enough to clasp mine for the entire duration of our visit. I was struck by a tiny mirror on the wall, about the size of a postcard. It was just big enough to check the tidiness of the veil that defined her existence here. Anything more would be vanity.

[1] The laundry and school at High Park had closed some years earlier, but at the time of this conversation, one refuge and laundry continued in operation in Dublin's north inner city. Once at the heart of an infamous red-light district known as 'The Monto', but inconceivably anachronistic by the time it finally closed in 1996—even to the last Reverend Mother who ran it: 'If a woman came in today with her daughter, I'd tell her to get lost…you don't hide people away.' 'Last Days of a Laundry', *The Irish Times*, 25 Sep 1996.

Two other things stand out from that visit. The first was the wrought iron arch which proclaimed the name of the place in stern capitals. I could tell it had once proudly spanned the tall entrance piers but now leaned forlornly against a crude breeze-block wall, in the shadow of a new apartment block rising behind. I supposed that it had been taken down for the building works and would soon be re-erected in its rightful place, and I was right only on one count. The second was the brass doorknob of the front door, by whose impossibly brilliant shine I was transfixed until it opened, and we were ushered across buffed parquet floors, past bottled ships resting on crocheted doilies to her room. That shine was a hallmark of the nuns, my mother explained: they upheld the highest standards in everything, even if the actual polishing was more likely the work of the 'girls' in their care. The fallen women.

We returned for the funeral a year later. The convent chapel, with its rich stained glass, stencilled ceiling and elaborate organ, reverberated with the music and song in which she had participated for sixty-six years.[2] All was open now, but later I saw the plans which clarified the original arrangement: transepts for 'orphans' on the left and 'penitents' on the right, the two groups rendered invisible to one another by the nuns' choirstalls down the nave.[3] Their elaborate oak carvings would later succumb to a voracious dry rot; those in either transept who spent hours and years staring at their rear flanks but unable to see past them may have lamented their decay less than I.

After the funeral Mass, the cortege made its way along a rough track cut across the tree-studded parkland to the private burial ground, a once shady corner now lying in the lee of the newly built nursing home which she had not lived to occupy. Every grave marked by a plain iron cross, everyone recalling another Sister Mary of Saint [Something]. On entering the institution, every woman left behind not only

[2] The organ was described as 'the best that money could buy' by a specialist survey undertaken in connection with later conservation works in which the author was professionally involved. It is possible that the sisters themselves undertook the stencilled decoration, see Kate Jordan, 'Ordered Spaces, Separate Spheres: Women and the Building of British Convents, 1829–1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2015), pp. 283–5.

[3] Irish Architectural Archive, WH Byrne Collection, IAA: 2006/142. The visual segregation of different categories of inmates was a key design feature of chapels in Magdalen asylums. See Jordan, pp 201–209.

their old lives but their old names too, taking religious names which, they would carry with them for as long as they stayed, even unto the grave.[4]

She was a respectable young woman from a highly respectable family. But even by the standards of 1920s Ireland, her young life was traumatic: her mother died when she was still very young, then her father, then her stepmother. There would be six children in all, offspring of four different marriages, the ever more complicated family tree rooted in the same county Tipperary farmhouse as alternate parents were laid to rest. She might have been happy to marry in due course but was not one to sit around waiting for proposals. She set her own trajectory, qualifying as a domestic science teacher as one of the first batches of graduates from the newly opened training college run by the Dominicans at Sion Hill.[5]

A strong farmer, local councillor, businessman, and soon-to-be national parliamentarian, her step (step) father (if someone so many marriages later even counted as such)[6] had 'pulled every string in the book' to secure her a plum teaching job at a newly opened Vocational School at the tender age of twenty-one, the same school which this author would later attend. 'I know it's a good school,' she once exclaimed, 'I taught there.' Those were lean times; a permanent teaching post was a valuable prize, dearly bought with hard-earned political capital.

Her stepfather could not conceal his disappointment when little more than a year later, that journey abruptly ended. In October 1933, she entered behind the high walls of High Park Magdalen Asylum. Sixty-six years later, she would be laid to rest behind those same walls. At the funeral, the mother superior, a 'young' nun in her fifties, expressed her sympathy with my mother as representative of the family. My mother's response was that theirs was the greater loss—the sisters were her family.

A few months after the funeral, the congregation kindly invited us to mark their farewell to the old convent, an event whose motto read 'For all that has been, Thanks. For all that will be, Yes.'[7] It was a

[4] High Park actually had two private burial grounds: one for nuns and one for 'consecrates'—women who, having entered as 'penitents,' elected to remain for the rest of their lives. Located at opposite ends of the property, both featured simple iron crosses bearing the religious name of the deceased—but the crosses also revealed the crucial distinction. Those whose crosses bore the prefix 'Sister Mary of [...]' yet repose peacefully; it was the remains of those titled 'Magdalen of [...]' which would be uprooted by the crisis in the congregation's finances in 1993.

[5] Jacinta Prunty, *The Monasteries, Magdalen Asylums and Reformatory Schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1853–1973* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017), p. 242.

[6] That is, her late stepmother's second husband.

[7] Author's private collection.

brave statement of faith in the face of a darkening reality. The world was changing, their community was ageing, the impenetrable edifice that had been Catholic Ireland was coming to realise that its proudest spires were built on sand, and recent events at High Park had played a significant role in undermining it. After the laundry, whose revenue had subsidised the institution's running costs, closed,[8] the sisters sold its lands to developers who replaced it with six-storey apartments, dwarfing the domineering edifice of the old convent. But neither the sisters nor the builders had fully reckoned with the bodies, 133 known, twenty-two more encountered along the way, the earthly remains of old women whose actions or vulnerability (real or imagined) as young girls transgressed the moral code of western Europe's last theocracy,[9] and who went on to the next life without ever returning to the one they had left outside the convent walls.[10] The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge had quietly run St Mary's Asylum at High Park for 140 years, but it was the exhumation and reburial of the 'consecrates' from the laundry grounds in September 1993 that would catapult the institution into the front pages.[11]

My grand-aunt didn't actually work in the laundry—although she would later initiate vocational training in domestic science there for the younger laundry girls 'with a view to their re-establishment in the world.'[12] She taught in the orphanage, or more accurately, St Joseph's Industrial School, a reformatory for girls removed by court order from families most likely alive but rendered dysfunctional by grinding poverty. In truth, her stepfather's disappointment was both superficial and short-lived: an in-joke that failed to conceal the pride that any parent of that period felt when a child followed their vocation into religious life. I rather suspect that her plan had quietly formed long before she took up that

[8] Operated without state support, refuges needed to be financially self-sufficient, and in common with other female welfare institutions, established commercial laundry operations where residents earned their board, with further funds raised from bequests and annual charity sermons.

[9] Ireland was never strictly a theocracy, but the term is employed as a useful shorthand for the enormous influence wielded by the Catholic Church in Ireland through the middle twentieth century. For a more nuanced exploration, see Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2002) and Daithí Ó Corráin, 'Catholicism in Ireland, 1880–2015: Rise, Ascendancy and Retreat', in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, ed. by Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 726–64.

[10] The extent to which such a decision was, or could ever be, truly 'voluntary' is a sociological conundrum. It is a choice that seems incomprehensible to contemporary sensibilities, now so far removed from the context of intense religiosity, moral judgement and sheer lack of economic opportunities of earlier times. Doubtless, such decisions cannot be divorced from the confidence-sapping experience of institutionalisation and a model of care which, even at its most benign, served to infantilise its subjects and amplify the perceived dangers of the outside world. But extreme caution is warranted by those who would presume to question the agency or critique the life decisions of those for whom the alternatives may have been even less appealing.

[11] *The Irish Times*, 13 Sep 1993.

[12] Prunty, p. 471.

hard-won teaching post: inspired perhaps by a sermon on her chosen congregation[13] and nourished by the outpouring of Catholic euphoria at the Eucharistic Congress in that summer of 1932.[14] The year of teaching might even have been undertaken on the advice of a novice-mistress: to spend a period in the outside world to fully discern her vocation before committing her life to the enclosed order.

In Tipperary, the teaching career to which she felt herself called might be cut short by marriage, but in High Park, nothing could distract her from the task of reforming young lives handicapped by economic hardship and family circumstances. As she saw it, the inculcation of practical domestic skills and the arcane minutiae of middle-class manners would help them to make their way in a country that offered few opportunities even for women as well-educated and well-connected as she had been, and fewer still for veterans of the industrial school or Magdalen laundry systems. It would be her life-long vocation, valued by at least some of her past students who did indeed go on to better things; at the funeral, one movingly delivered a poem penned in her honour.

There was little poetry when I next set foot in High Park fourteen years later, though the words of the Taoiseach's recent state apology 'to all those women for the hurt that was done to them, and for any stigma they suffered, as a result of the time they spent in a Magdalene Laundry' were still fresh. I found a place that had deteriorated as rapidly as the reputation of those who built it.[15] Still committed to their charism of care for the vulnerable—albeit struggling to acclimatise to their new status as a pariah and object of popular outrage—the congregation passed their old convent to a voluntary housing association for use as sheltered accommodation. The brass doorknob was dull, the paintwork peeling. Prodigious dry rot had taken hold of the ornate chapel. The industrial school was a burnt-out shell, a victim not of arson by some former internee but of a freak accident involving strong sunlight, distorted old glass, and

[13] Originally a French congregation, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge at this point had only two houses in Ireland, both in Dublin and relatively unknown beyond the city. Following the Rule created by Founder John Eudes, who established the first refuge in Caen in 1641, their charism was the 'reformation of the fallen' and the 'preservation of girls who are in danger of being brought up immorally,' not an obvious calling for someone raised in rural county Tipperary.

[14] An event attended by up to one-third of the population, which reinforced Ireland's identity as an independent Catholic nation and could even be seen as the coming-out party for the young Free State. See David G. Holmes, 'The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and Irish Identity', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 4.1 (2000), 55–78, (pp. 56–8).

[15] Having featured at length as one of ten institutions investigated in the state's independent report: Martin McAleese, *Report of the Inter-departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* (hereafter *McAleese Report*) (Dublin: Department of Justice and Equality, 2013). See also James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

a store-room full of flammable cleaning chemicals. My task was a melancholy one—to record a list of historic features to be recovered from the ruins before the bulldozers erased another relic of a time and a system now described as 'the nation's shame'.[16] Top of my salvage list was the statue of St Joseph the Worker in his pedimented niche, patron saint of every other industrial school in the Catholic universe, beneath whose watchful gaze she had for so long laboured. I still wonder if she could ever have grasped just how differently the nation would come to weigh her life's vocation, but I hope that she might have appreciated the gesture, at least.

Author's Reflections

Despite the socially mandated silence that long shrouded them, there are few families who can claim to be wholly insulated from Ireland's modern history of mass-institutionalisation. Having spent the best part of a decade studying its resultant architectural legacy, this piece of writing emerged as an unexpected digression, an opportunity for reflection on my own memories and connections with a place whose name is now synonymous with the more negative aspects of an uncomfortable history.

When researching the events of that time, it came as a surprise to discover just how intimately personal memory and recorded history were stitched together in a single week in September 1993.[17] For it is clear to me now that my grand-aunt's visit to her birthplace was a brief but vital respite from a storm for which nothing in her long-cloistered life could have prepared her. What started in the last week of August as low-key reportage of the exhumation had,[18] by the first week of September, gathered a momentum of its own which catapulted her quiet community into the spotlight of a media storm.[19] Their *mensis horribilis* worsened with the death of a former mother superior[20] before culminating in the re-interment of the cremated remains of the 155 women at Glasnevin Cemetery on 11 September, a photograph of which appeared on the front page of the Irish Times, despite the congregation's ill-judged

[16] Enda Kenny TD, Dáil Éireann, 19 Feb 2013, 793:1.

[17] The memories on which I have based this piece are mere fragments, relatively few in number, but individually quite clear and conveniently dateable. It has been gratifying that later visits and more recently published photographs have corroborated their spatial and visual aspects.

[18] '133 Bodies to be Exhumed,' *The Irish Times*, 25 Aug 1993.

[19] 'The Laundry Girls,' *The Irish Times,* 4 Sep 1993.

[20] Death Notice, Mother Eithne O'Neill, *The Irish Times*, 3 Sep 1993.

attempts to maintain it as 'a private matter.'[21] Two decades later, the exhumations and reburials would command an entire chapter of the independent report into Ireland's Magdalen Laundries.[22]

Over the years, I have walked dozens of redundant and decaying institutional complexes, accumulating knowledge around their history and operation and occasionally getting a chance to employ it in their reuse. Gravity seems to weigh more heavily in these places, a tangible sense of lifetimes lived out in isolation from mainstream society. The long shadow of challenging histories invariably present dilemmas around remembering and forgetting, memorialising and letting go. My professional involvement in the 'reformation' of the buildings at High Park for a new educational use was relatively brief, but it tested the professional detachment one typically brings to such projects. Here was yet another generic institutional pile burdened by a stigmatised past, but this was one whose derelict rooms I knew first hand, which were occupied for six decades by my own kin whose calling was now seen to have fallen on the wrong side of history. The experience served as a humbling reminder that the spaces we study as academics or reshape as professionals were not inhabited by an alien 'they,' but by an intimately related 'we.'

History now records the exhumations at High Park in September 1993 as one of the earliest in a two-decade litany of scandals which destroyed the seemingly unassailable position of respect and deference enjoyed by the Catholic Church in Ireland.[23] In the decades since, Irish society has belatedly, and rightly, sought to listen to and learn from the stories of those—typically poor and urban—who dwelt powerless within a spectrum of institutions of varying levels of harshness operated by the religious, who were more often drawn from comfortable and rural backgrounds like hers.[24] The personal stories

---

[21] Including a refusal to notify or invite family members of any of the known deceased. *The Irish Times*, 13 Sep. 1993. The most extraordinary thing about the whole episode is that the area of the former burial ground was not actually needed for the residential development and remains unbuilt to this day: the imperative to exhume and reinter the remains was not even commercial. It seems likely that the congregation thought it better to provide a respectful and decorous reburial on their own terms rather than risk surrendering the long-term maintenance of the burial ground to a third party.

[22] *McAleese Report*, Chapter 16, pp 719–813. If we also consider that it took the disclosure in 2014 of a mass grave containing up to 800 infants to force an inquiry into mother and baby homes, the Irish psyche might still stand accused of being more affronted by indignity in death than in life.

[23] Which include *inter-alia*: 1992 Bishop Eamon Casey affair; 1993 High Park exhumations, Fr Michael Cleary affair; 1994 Fr Brendan Smyth affair, which collapsed a government; 1999 States of Fear Documentary; 2002 Residential Institutions Redress Scheme; 2005 Ferns Report; 2009 Ryan Report, Murphy Report; 2011 Cloyne Report; 2013 McAleese Report.

[24] *Coercive Confinement in Ireland: Patients, Prisoners and Penitents*, ed. by Eoin O'Sullivan and Ian O'Donnell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 274.

of some of the ten thousand Irish women[25] 'condemned to servitude and confinement' in Magdalen Laundries 'with the knowledge, coercion and approval of family, church and state' have helped to change the understanding and views of a whole society.[26] A country which acclaimed the religious and mercilessly judged their inmates now does precisely the opposite; reflexive value judgements around those who operated Magdalen Laundries, and those committed to them, seem unavoidable. By creating a degree of ambiguity around the role and status of the primary character in this piece, I was hoping to delay the rush to judgement, at least for long enough for the reader to connect with the individual and not the stereotype.

The same demographic urgency that belatedly retrieved the stories of institutional survivors also applies to the thousands of women who voluntarily submitted to convent life—the choice by some estimates of one in every four hundred female school-leavers in the middle decades of the twentieth century.[27] It is a window that is rapidly closing. Whether vilified as the irredeemable villains of the piece,[28] exalted as pioneering and entrepreneurial proto-feminists,[29] or cast as the superfluous siblings of a system of patrilineal, impartible inheritance,[30] the personal reflections of those who lived long enough to witness the disintegration of the system to which they committed their lives, for better and worse, could only improve our understanding of the history of our own times. Reconstructing a life, a place and a culture from fragments—as attempted by this piece—can only ever be a poor substitute.

[25] It is now estimated that 10,012 women spent time in a Magdalen Laundry between 1922 and 1996, compared to popular estimates of 30,000. Insofar as the limited records allow statistical conclusions to be drawn, around 8.7% of the total spent more than 10 years in a laundry, the same percentage (if not necessarily the same individuals) died therein. *McAleese Report*, p. xiii.

[26] The language was remarkably blunt for 1993 yet would seem restrained by later standards. 'The Laundry Girls,' *The Irish Times*, 4 Sep. 1993. The memories of five former residents of the Sean McDermott Street Laundry have collaborated with researchers from Queens University Belfast to produce 'The Atlas of Lost Rooms,' a virtual reconstruction of the spaces of the former laundry based on a combination of archival research and oral testimony. http://www.atlasoflostrooms.com/, accessed on 29 Sep 2021.

[27] '"Re-emerging issue" of women's relationship with State examined,' *The Irish Times*, 25 Aug 1993.

[28] Peter Mullen's film The Magdalen Sisters, 2002, is credited by Luddy with creating the popular perception of the laundries and the nuns who ran them. Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[29] Barbara Walsh, 'Lifting the Veil on Entrepreneurial Irishwomen: Running Convents in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *History Ireland*, 11:4, 2003, pp. 23–28.

[30] O'Sullivan and O'Donnell, pp. 269–78.

Bibliography

Fuller, Louise, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2002)

Holmes, David G., 'The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and Irish Identity', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua,* 4.1 (2000), 55–78

Jordan, Kate, 'Ordered Spaces, Separate Spheres: Women and the Building of British Convents, 1829–1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2015)

Luddy, Maria, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

McAleese, Martin, *Report of the Inter-departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* (Dublin: Department of Justice and Equality, 2013)

Ó'Corráin, Daithí, 'Catholicism in Ireland, 1880–2015: Rise, Ascendancy and Retreat', in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, ed. by Thomas Bartlett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

O'Sullivan, Eoin and Ian O'Donnell, eds., *Coercive Confinement in Ireland: Patients, Prisoners and Penitents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012)

Prunty, Jacinta, *The Monasteries, Magdalen Asylums and Reformatory Schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1853–1973* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017)

Smith, James M., *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)

Walsh, Barbara, 'Lifting the Veil on Entrepreneurial Irishwomen: Running Convents in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *History Ireland*, 11:4 (2003) 23–28

Copyright © Patrick Quinlan 2022