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REVIEW ESSAY: Female Institutionalisation in Twentieth-Century Ireland

DEIRDRE FINNERTY, *Bessborough: Three Women. Three Decades. Three Stories of Courage*, Dublin: Hachette Books, 2022, 336 pp., RRP £14.99, ISBN: 9781529340389.

CHLOË K. GOTT, *Experience, Identity & Epistemic Injustice within Ireland's Magdalene Laundries*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 248pp., RRP £85, ISBN: 9781350254428.

MIRIAM HAUGHTON, MARY MCAULIFFE AND EMILIE PINE (eds), *Legacies of the Magdalene Laundries: Commemoration, Gender, and the Postcolonial Carceral State*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021, 296pp., RRP £85, ISBN: 9781526150806.

CAELAINN HOGAN, *Republic of Shame: Stories from Ireland's Institutions for 'Fallen Women'*, Dublin: Penguin, 2019, 256pp., RRP £9.99, ISBN: 9780241984123.

CLAIRE MCGETTRICK, KATHERINE O'DONNELL, MAEVE O'ROURKE, JAMES M. SMITH AND MARI STEED, *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, Dublin: I. B. Tauris, 2021, 304pp., RRP £21.99 ISBN: 9780755617494.

KATHERINE O'DONNELL, MAEVE O'ROURKE AND JAMES M. SMITH, (eds), *Redress: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice*, Dublin: UCD Press, 2022, 550pp., RRP €25, ISBN: 9781910820896.

The release of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (2021), following the Interdepartmental Committee Report into Magdalene Laundries (McAleese Report 2013), in the Republic of Ireland and the Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922-1990 report (2021) in Northern Ireland has led to a surge in publications on Ireland's institutionalisation of women, from the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 to the closing of the last Magdalene Laundry in Dublin in 1996. As the Irish government and society sought to establish a strong sense of Irish nationhood from 1922, social provision was largely given over to religious organisations, particularly those run by the Catholic Church. Irish people who did not fit within the ideals of a society increasingly focused on respectability and sexual morality were frequently institutionalised, hidden behind high walls and with little opportunity to leave. As a result, many of those most in need of care and support, were removed from wider society and incarcerated in industrial schools, Magdalene asylums, and Mother and Baby Institutions (and frequently moved between them). The cultures of shame that surrounded this institutionalisation, and the varied forms of abuse that took place within them, have left deep scars within Irish society and its diaspora which are now beginning to be addressed. These books are written by a range of academics, journalists, and activists who are responding to the public demand for new approaches in confronting the legacies of institutionalisation. Discussions surrounding access of adoptees to their birth records and financial and medical compensation for victims and survivors of institutionalisation in Ireland,

continue alongside international reckonings with the deaths, trauma, and lost records of those in residential schools, industrial schools, Magdalen Asylums, Mother and Baby Institutions, county homes, and other institutions. Investigative reporting, alongside the tireless work of Catherine Corless in Tuam, have led to an increasingly aware and engaged public. The success of Peter Mullan's 2002 film *Magdalene Sisters* and Stephen Frears' 2013 film *Philomena* have been built upon with major art exhibitions in Ireland (2021-22) and literary works such as Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021). The works that this article focuses upon are therefore drawn from inside and outside academia and constitute a moment in history where public, governmental, legal, and academic demand for a reckoning with the human rights abuses, carried out within institutions but with the acquiescence, if not active support, of the wider Irish state and society. While this work has taken place since the late 1990s (culminating in the Ryan Report (2009) into historical abuse in industrial schools), there has been a dearth of scholarship surrounding institutional abuse and the frameworks used to address it in Ireland. Until now. Emerging as the Decade of Centenaries draws to a close, and the centenaries of the establishment of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland are commemorated, these books represent a sea-change in the writing of institutional history in Ireland and a true engagement with the voices of those who were previously ignored.

Throughout these books is the consideration of 'stories' and storytelling: who is perceived to tell the 'best' story and who is that story 'best' for? Questions about when a story becomes evidence or proof, and when it is doubted and questioned to the extent of it being completely undermined (often framed as epistemic injustice) are under the microscope. Examining how, and to whom, these 'stories' have been told allows editors and authors to place the vital work of oral history collection, particularly by Katherine O'Donnell and the Justice for Magdalene Research (JFMR) team, alongside theatre productions, legal proceedings, the material legacies of Magdalen laundries, and memoir, to name just a few of the topics considered across these edited collections. The ongoing influence of James M. Smith's *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries* (2007) and his concept of the 'architecture of confinement' cannot be underestimated. Experts who have been deeply involved in activism around the rights of incarcerated women and vulnerable groups emphasise the interconnectedness of institutions in Ireland, and further afield. Instead of siloing the experiences of survivors of different institutions, these collections recognise that there was frequent movement between and across institutions, and that the misuse of power and

atmospheres of shame can not to be examined properly in isolation. There is also an acknowledgement that national borders did not stop the trafficking of problematised bodies. Women were moved between institutions across the island of Ireland and ‘returned’ from Britain, while babies and young children were sent to the United States to be adopted. The ideas and structures used to justify and enforce moralising norms were replicated, or at least reflected, across the world. The fight for transitional justice, which uses the four principles of truth-telling, accountability, redress and reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence to confront the legacy of large-scale past abuses, was not confined to Ireland, and these scholars make it clear that there is a duty to learn lessons from reconciliation and redemptive practices elsewhere.

The very personal connections of many of those who have led the fight for redress can be seen throughout the edited collections. Mari Steed begins *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice* by outlining her family’s multigenerational connections to, and trauma from, institutions and societies obsessed with punishing those who ‘didn’t quite meet the “standards” of morality, purity or whatever was deemed the norm’ (p.xii). Similarly, Claire McGettrick and Caitríona Palmer’s reflections in *Redress* powerfully highlight the ongoing legacies, not just on the immediate survivors but on their children and wider families, of this obsession with codes of (usually female) sexuality and morality. McGettrick, O’Donnell, O’Rourke, Smith, and Steed appear across these edited collections, and therefore it is fascinating to read of their tireless activism through JFMR. As the authors of *A Campaign for Justice* write in their introduction,

We do not claim a monopoly in telling the story of either the Magdalene Laundries or the fight for justice. But we believe it is important that survivors and their family members hear directly from us as to how we experienced the campaign that we fought on their behalf. (p.1)

This emphasis on responsibility to the survivors, and on self-reflection, seen so often throughout these texts, is frequently at odds with the perceived sense of responsibility felt by the state and religious institutions who ran and perpetuated the architecture of confinement.

The connections between the authors and their subjects can be seen in the sources used. In *Experience, Identity & Epistemic Justice*, Chloë K. Gott presents the

first significant secondary analysis of the [JFMR oral history] project, approaching the topic of the Magdalene institutions not from a desire to construct a narrative of

historical accuracy, but, rather, to learn more about the nature of women's experiences in these institutions, and the ways in which they were (un)able to communicate these experiences. (p.187)

Drawing together approaches from religious sociology and oral history, Gott explores how the voices of women who were institutionalised in Ireland have been mistrusted, questioned, and silenced. Who is a 'credible' subject? Institutionalised women were rarely trusted with information about their own incarceration. They were often not told where they were being sent; they were never told when they would be able to leave; when they did eventually get to leave, if they had children, they were rarely told that the children were being sent away; and the women were rarely allowed time to say goodbye to others in the institution. They simply disappeared. Gott argues that 'the experience of repeatedly *not* being trusted with information... emphasises the extent to which you are viewed as unreliable and untrustworthy' (p. 81). This question of reliability echoed throughout the government commissions into the experiences of institutionalisation, especially glaringly during the Mother and Baby Home Commission.

Gott uses the JFMR oral history project, led by Katherine O'Donnell, to explore the women's constructions of their lives - she is uninterested in the 'facts', reflecting that the 'facts' of why a woman was sent to a laundry are counterproductive, because what actually counts in that case? Is it the reason stated on the convent record? Is it the convent record, which isn't available to view because the convent archives are not open to researchers? Instead, Gott argues that 'what is significant is the way in which [the survivor] was made to feel, the impact this information had on her' (p.77) and that is the focus of this book: how the histories of individuals, religious communities, and the state push up against each other within twentieth-century Ireland, and how those histories are constructed. Questions of power and privileged narratives emerge throughout Gott's book. While the first chapters focus on who gets to be considered a 'credible' subject, and interestingly a credible religious subject, the later chapters turn to ask whose voice gets a platform. Gott seeks to realign the power of Taoiseach Enda Kenny's apology and the statements of regret (as opposed to apology) that were released by religious orders involved in running Magdalene institutions with the views of those who were the victims of these institutions. These statements of regret and apology are interrogated in various ways across all the books under review, with leading human rights and feminist legal academics, Mairead Enright and Maeve O'Rourke's chapters in *Redress* tangling with arguments surround state shame and how that

official understanding of responsibility, financial and moral, has reduced the state's capacity to actually undertake meaningful redress to victims of human rights abuses. Miriam Haughton, Mary McAuliffe and Emilie Pine's edited collection, *Legacies of the Magdalen Laundries: Commemoration, gender, and the postcolonial carceral state*, also takes up these questions. In this collection, Eilís Ward considers the Irish state and the deaths of women who sell sex while Vukasin Nedeljkovic underlines the ongoing architecture of containment found in Ireland's Direct Provision Centres.

The development of Gott's argument surrounding the religious subjectivities of women who survived institutions is particularly interesting. As Gott notes, religion is often left out of discussions of modern feminism, to the extent that feminism is frequently portrayed as a secular alternative to religious engagement. This false dichotomy, and the ways that feminism and religion intersect for many, is the focus of chapter 5 but is a theme that Gott develops throughout the book. She is less concerned with what this means in terms of religious belief, instead focusing on how religion affected their daily lives and actions, particularly in terms of social, cultural, and community bonds in twentieth- and twenty-first century Ireland. Religiosity and respectability have traditionally been interwoven in Ireland, and for women who were forced to engage with religious practice in a carceral setting, these identities were and have been balanced or thrown off over time.

Reflecting Gott's emphasis on promoting the voices of individual women who survived institutions, Deirdre Finnerty's *Bessborough* focuses in on the life stories of three women who were incarcerated in the Bessborough Mother and Baby institution across three decades, the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These life stories are based on interviews with these women and then contextualised by Finnerty. As this book is very much aimed at a public audience, this wider framing of individual experiences is crucial. For those wishing to delve further into the subject, but still on a reasonable budget, Caelainn Hogan's *Republic of Shame* is a brilliant overview of what she calls the 'shame-industrial complex' that operated for so much of Ireland's modern history. The connections between religious orders, institutions of containment, figures of societal authority, and the Irish State – both the clear and the purposefully occluded – are investigated and drawn out, while the voices of those affected are sensitively engaged with. Throughout these books is the awareness that while Ireland's institutions are often put forward as an unpleasant aspect of Ireland's history, a past that Ireland is trying to quickly shed both nationally and on the

international stage, the legacies of these histories are integral parts of the everyday life of many. As the subject of teaching histories of institutionalisation in Irish schools becomes more prominent, books like Finnerty's *Bessborough* and Hogan's *Republic of Shame* will provide an entry point for young students to engage with difficult subjects, and will hopefully pave the way for further in-depth critical analysis of the lives that were lived and survived in Magdalen Asylums and Mother and Baby Institutions.

Redress, a volume edited by Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke and James M. Smith, brings together survivors, academics, and activists (and those who fit into multiple categories), demonstrating the varied types of expertise and knowledge, all of which are vital in uncovering the histories of institutionalisation and their myriad effects. The overlaps between institutions, all part of the architecture of confinement, are placed side by side, undermining the false barrier created by the government commissions which tend to view institutions as distinct from each other. These collections emphasise that though Magdalen Laundries, Mother and Baby/County Homes, and Industrial Schools, had distinct problems, they were part of a wider structure of shame and neglect.

As most of the 24 chapters in *Redress* focus on transitional justice and injustice in hierarchies of knowledge gathering and transmission (epistemic in/justice), there is a certain amount of repetition throughout the book. The key definitions and frameworks are explained and returned to. However, a book of such length is unlikely to be read in one-sitting. Instead, this repetition allows for the chapters in this book – which will be of great use in teaching contexts – to be engaged with on a standalone basis, though the chapters complement each other when read as a whole. The opening section of the book, 'Truth-Telling', consists of five chapters, combining the testimony of victim-survivors compiled at the 2018 Boston College international conference Towards Transitional Justice: Recognition, Truth-Telling and Institutional Abuse in Ireland – the inspiration for the collection – with long-form essays written by prominent journalists and writers.

The question of what justice looks like and means is the focus of the second and third sections: focusing on what justice for institutional abuse could look like when considered through a range of international frameworks, principally feminist and human rights approaches. Across the whole collection, reference is made to transitional justice attempts and limitations in different contexts, including through international comparisons with Australia, Canada, and

South Africa. Katherine O'Donnell's chapter on 'belligerent ignorance' and 'official Ireland's response' to the Magdalene Laundries is particularly fascinating on questioning hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge. 'The state and religious orders deny access to the archives and documents on which their knowledge claims are (apparently) based and so their wilful practice of substantive ignorance is more difficult to challenge and falsify' (p.302). Paul Michael Garrett on creating 'common sense' responses to 'unmarried mothers' uses Gramsci's concept of hegemony to demonstrate how church and state worked hand-in-hand to uphold their own power and justify, without actually justifying, the 'architecture of containment' as defined by James Smith. Claire McKettrick's chapter on 'illegitimate knowledge' continues this theme, while the accidental revelations held in the archive are explored by James Smith. Conall Ó Fáharta's chapter focuses on the cyclical nature of creating, maintaining and upholding the state-led narrative on institutional abuse. As he notes in relation to the Magdalene Laundries, and the state finding that there was 'no credible evidence of systematic torture or criminal torture' in response to a request from the UN Committee Against Torture, the state

continues to cite the *McAleese Report* as the de-facto narrative of how the Magdalene laundry system operated in Ireland. That would be fine if researchers could access any of the material in order to challenge the findings of the *McAleese Report*. However, they can't... We must simply accept that the *McAleese Report* as we find it (p.129).

Patricia Lundy's chapter on how survivors experience historical abuse commissions, and importantly what they feel they get from participating in often retraumatising activities, helps to frame the sense of frustration and alienation which survivors across these collections, and in the public sphere, frequently raise.

In chapter 23 of *Redress*, Gordon Lynch's experience testifying to multiple commissions into historical child abuse sets out a strong call for a coherent and thorough approach to collecting historical data from across multiple archives. He underscores the damage being done to survivors by the lack of access to the archives of religious orders and the 'quarantining' of the archives of the different commissions in Ireland. Emilie Pine, Susan Leavy and Mark T. Keane's short chapter in the same collection uses data mining to demonstrate how staff were moved across institutions, instead of being removed from contact with vulnerable people. In the Haughton, McAuliffe and Pine collection, comparisons across national and institutional borders continue

with Sarah-Anne Buckley and Lorraine Grimes comparing case studies of children's homes in Ireland and the UK.

The intersections of space, art, and material legacies are explored in various ways across all the edited collections under review. In *Legacies of the Magdalen Laundries*, Alienne Fernandes took Patricia Burke Brogan's 1988 play *Eclipsed*, set in a Magdalene Laundry in 1963 and 1992, and translated it for a Brazilian audience in 2016. Fernandes reflects on her experience translating and directing a reading of the play, and context, for a Brazilian audience. This 'co-construction' of material space and memory is the focus of Jennifer O'Mahoney, Kate McCarthy and Jonathan Culleton's chapter on the Waterford Memories Project (2016) and the opportunities presented in utilising ex-institutional spaces to host theatre productions engaging with the site's past. This theme is also highlighted by Laura McAtackney (*Redress*) who powerfully considers the role of archaeology and the memories held in the material 'leftovers' of institutions.

The involvement of a core group of scholars and activists in all of these collections is unsurprising due to their long and personal involvement in organisations like the Justice for Magdalenes Research and the fight for access to adoption records. These scholar-activists have dedicated years to holding the Irish state and religious organisations accountable for their actions during the twentieth century and to amplifying the voices of victim-survivors. This does mean that the same ground is covered across multiple books, though each book contains sufficient additional voices and perspectives to ensure that there isn't too much repetition. As few people, apart from those researching the subject, will read all of these books, there is a necessity in repeating the key points and experiences. We have all benefited from the tireless work of those involved in interrogating the architecture of confinement. These books are a testament to their activities both in highlighting previously silenced voices and shining a light on the financial, carceral, and personal threads that were woven throughout Irish society in the twentieth century. This collection of books provides an opportunity for those working in the public eye and those in the background to reflect on how much work has been done, what has been achieved, and what is still to do.

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