



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

James M. Smith

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The Magdalen laundries were workhouses in which many Irish women and girls were effectively imprisoned because they were perceived to be a threat to the moral fiber of society. Mandated by the Irish state beginning in the eighteenth century, they were operated by various orders of the Catholic Church until the last laundry closed in 1996. A few years earlier, in 1993, an order of nuns in Dublin sold part of their Magdalen convent to a real estate developer. The remains of 155 inmates, buried in unmarked graves on the property, were exhumed, cremated, and buried elsewhere in a mass grave. This triggered a public scandal in Ireland and since then the Magdalen laundries have become an important issue in Irish culture, especially with the 2002 release of the film “The Magdalene Sisters.”

Focusing on the ten Catholic Magdalen laundries operating between 1922 and 1996, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* offers the first history of women entering these institutions in the twentieth century. Because the religious orders have not opened their archival records, Smith argues that Ireland's Magdalen institutions continue to exist in the public mind primarily at the level of *story* (cultural representation and survivor testimony) rather than *history* (archival history and documentation).

Addressed to academic and general readers alike, James M. Smith's book accomplishes three primary objectives. First, it connects what history we have of the Magdalen laundries to Ireland's “architecture of containment” that made undesirable segments of the female population such as illegitimate children, single mothers, and sexually promiscuous women literally invisible. Second, it critically evaluates cultural representations in drama and visual art of the laundries that have, over the past fifteen years, brought them significant attention in Irish culture. Finally, Smith challenges the nation—church, state, and society—to acknowledge its complicity in Ireland's Magdalen scandal and to offer redress for victims and survivors alike.

“This book offers at once a critical examination of society’s understanding of the Magdalen institutions and provides a means of refocusing attention on the ways in which memory, commemoration, and responsibility work in Irish society, especially in relation to these particular institutions. I have no doubt that this will be an important book. It will prove controversial, it will restart the debate on the Magdalen institutions in Ireland, and it should receive considerable publicity.” —**Maria Luddy, University of Warwick**

“*Ireland's Magdalen Laundries* is the story of young women locked away for a lifetime, without due process or appeal, for perceived sins of the flesh, a violation of a moral code established not by the government but by the most powerful force in the country, the Catholic Church. James M. Smith has provided the first comprehensive history of the magdalen laundries; unlocking the secrets, dispelling the myths, and providing the context for a most regrettable era that shocked and embarrassed not just the church, but the Irish people.” —**Steve Kroft, correspondent, 60 Minutes**

“*Ireland's Magdalen Laundries* is an important book, written with scrupulous attention to detail and impeccably researched. This is a dark and deeply emotional subject about which James M. Smith manages to be fair-minded and calm in his judgments. It is an essential book for anyone interested in the fear and cruelty

surrounding women's sexuality in the Ireland of the recent past.” —**Colm Tóibín**

“This is a book about amnesia, acknowledgment and atonement. It weaves history, politics, and art together in one of the most compelling and best-written studies I’ve read in recent years. Smith is able to stand outside his subject, independent of affiliation, and he manages to resist the urge for cheap outrage. It is a serious, brilliant, art-driven examination of a story, or history, that needs to be told over and over and over again, lest it be forgotten or allowed to seep into the ambient noise.” —**Colum McCann**

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