



Mary Raftery

## Restoring dignity to Magdalens

Exactly 10 years ago, a firm of Dublin undertakers began a mass exhumation in Drumcondra.

As far as they were concerned, the papers were all in order: 133 bodies were to be dug up and ferried to Glasnevin Cemetery, where they would be cremated. It was a small burial plot, with the graves unmarked except for a few plain black crosses.

Not exactly a run-of-the-mill job for the undertakers, but not that unusual either. It was only when they discovered 22 additional bodies that alarm bells began ringing.

This was a burial site for Magdalens, women who had effectively been locked up for most of their lives, working for no wages in High Park convent, one of the largest and oldest Magdalen Laundries in the country.

By the early 1990s, the laundry had closed and the nuns - the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge - were selling their land to housing developers. The nuns had gambled and lost on the stock exchange and needed cash.

The snag was the graveyard for the Magdalen women who had died in their service was on the land they had sold. So the good Sisters did a deal with the developers that each would pay half the cost to clear the land of the remains.

To exhume a grave, you need an exhumation licence from the Department of the Environment.

The nuns were granted such a licence for 133 bodies buried at the High Park plot. The list of names they provided to the Department makes for interesting reading.

Twenty-three of the women are listed under the heading "quasi-religious name" - the nuns admitted that they did not know their real names. They called them "Magdalen of St Cecilia, Magdalen of Lourdes, Magdalen of St Ieresa", and so on. Another woman had only a first name.

The nuns told the Department that as they had no names, death certificates for these 24 women could not be produced. The Department raised no objection, despite the fact that some of the women had died as recently as the late 1960s. The nuns also said that there were no death certs for a further 54 women. These women at least had names. But the cause and date of death for most of them are listed as "not known". Some of these women died as recently as the mid-1970s.

It is a criminal offence in this State to fail to register a death which occurs on your premises. This is normally done by a relative. In the case of the Magdalen women, it was the legal duty of the nuns to register their deaths. It would appear that for at least 58 of these women, the nuns failed to do so.

And then there were the additional 22 bodies discovered by the undertakers. All work on the graves had to cease immediately, as these remains were not covered by the exhumation licence.

What the Department of the Environment then did was to investigate, they simply put through an additional licence to allow the nuns to remove all bodies from the graveyard. They didn't even ask if anyone knew

Might so many unexplained, unregistered deaths be investigated?

the identities of the extra 22.

All but one of the bodies were cremated, destroying any possibility of future identifications. The nuns had been informed that the cost of reburial remains intact would be considerable, and so they went for the cheaper option.

Until 20 years ago, cremation was forbidden by Catholic Church canon law. Even today it is frowned on as undesirable. Canon 1176 now "earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained".

None of this cut much ice with the High Park nuns. Cremation proceeded smoothly, despite the fact that the State was fully aware that more than half the deaths of those exhumed had never been certified. The ashes were interred in a plot in Glasnevin. A headstone with a list of names now marks the grave.

However, a comparison of the names and dates on that headstone and the list supplied by the nuns to the Department of the Environment is startling. Only 27 of the names and dates coincide. So either the list of names given to the Department to obtain the exhumation licence was substantially false, or the names on the Glasnevin gravestone bear little relation to the identities of those actually buried there.

Last Easter, I asked the nuns at High Park to explain all of this. They chose not to respond to any of the 19 detailed questions I put to them. Instead, earlier this week, they issued a statement claiming that the exhumation was carried out in order to provide the women with a permanent resting place.

Their concern to respect the dead Magdalen women is no doubt touching. But might perhaps the Minister for Justice be concerned enough to investigate so many unexplained and unregistered deaths? And who will care enough to restore to these women the dignity of their real names - something the nuns stripped ruthlessly from them in life? It is surely the duty of the State to return some respect to these, its citizens, whom it deserted so comprehensively both in life and in death.

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