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## **An Outcast Community: the 'wrens' of the Curragh**

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the lifestyle of a particular group of women who operated as prostitutes and were known as the 'Wrens of the Curragh'. It also briefly examines the extent of prostitution in nineteenth-century Ireland and the particular Catholic ethos of those Magdalen asylums operated by female religious. The Irish discourse on prostitution was very much formed by the rescue work of female religious and prostitutes were judged in spiritual and moral terms. The information available on the 'Wrens' comes to us primarily through the work of an English journalist, James Greenwood. The discourse is quite different in many respects to that which pertained in Catholic circles though there are also a number of similarities. Greenwood's account of the 'Wrens' gives us a unique insight into the everyday existence of a group of 'outcast' women who worked in their own interests and created their own community network away from 'respectable' society.

Throughout nineteenth-century Ireland there were a number of groupings of women who were considered 'outcast' and were removed from mainstream society. These women were generally classified as the 'fallen' and included unmarried mothers, vagrants, prostitutes, ex-convicts and alcoholics. What characterised these groups of 'fallen' women generally was the fact that they did not display what were considered to be the acceptable modes of behaviour and conduct deemed necessary to be a 'respectable' woman. To be such meant the practice of certain virtues such as piety, chastity, sobriety, submissiveness, cleanliness and domesticity. It was as nuns that women achieved their highest status in Irish society. For many women, however, this was not an attainable ideal and the majority of Irish women lived their lives as wives and mothers, operating within the home, the sanctuary of respectability.[1]

The purpose of this paper is to look at the lives of one particular group of outcast women, the 'wrens' of the Curragh, many, though not all, of whom were prostitutes, and to examine the structures of their existence. The

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lives of prostitutes are particularly difficult to personalise since historians working in this area generally have to rely on institutional and official documents, such as prison records, the reports of rescue agencies or hospital records, to reconstruct their life stories.[2] The information on the 'wrens' goes further than institutional records to allow a glimpse of the everyday existence of a group of women who lived on the margins of society. Before looking at their lives in detail, however, I would like to place the subject in context by briefly examining the extent of prostitution in Ireland in the last century, and the particular Irish discourse surrounding the subject.

In the nineteenth century prostitution was a sizeable problem in Irish society. This is not at all evident from census returns. In 1841, for example, when the occupation was first listed, the census reveals the unlikely total of six individuals engaged in the business.[3] However, if we take a look at the Metropolitan police statistics, which are available for Dublin from 1838, we can see that the problem was much more widespread. In 1838 there were 2410 convictions for solicitation in the city, this rose to 3855 by 1844. Convictions declined from the 1860s to reach a low of 487 by 1899. From the criminal statistics available for the entire country from the 1860s we find that in 1870, for example, a total of 3673 women were arrested for soliciting. It is of course possible that these figures are underestimated for if we add the number of women arrested for other offences but who were known to the police as prostitutes we find that arrests for soliciting totalled 11,864 in 1870 and 2970 in 1900.[4] These figures do not account for re-arrests but it is also unlikely that the police arrested every prostitute who operated throughout the country. It is, in fact, impossible to give an exact figure regarding the number of women who operated as prostitutes in the last century but it is possible that the figure certainly numbered hundreds if not thousands, at least up to the 1870s.[5] Evidence of the prevalence of prostitution around military barracks during this period would seem to support this conclusion.

It is almost too obvious a fact to state that wherever you have troops garrisoned there will also be a flourishing prostitution industry. Those towns that housed garrisons in Ireland in the nineteenth century were no exception. A Colonel Moore, writing from Newbridge in 1847, stated that the barracks was 'infested' with prostitutes who could not be constrained from climbing the barrack walls.[6] Mason, in his parochial survey in the second decade of the century, similarly noted the immorality that existed in Athlone and the protestant rector commented that prostitutes:

infest the streets, as well as the hedges and ditches about the town, not only to the destruction of the morality, of the present as well as the rising generation, but even in violation of common decency; to such a pitch is depravity risen, that vice does not hide its deeds in darkness, but boldly stalks abroad in open day.[7]

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The famous or infamous 'Monto' district in Dublin also had its origins as a brothel holding area from early in the nineteenth century when the fear of a French invasion caused the garrisoning of extra troops in houses along Mecklenburgh street. The area thrived as a red light district until the 1920s when Frank Duff and the Legion of Mary caused the demise of the trade in the area.[8]

The Tipperary town commissioners first recorded problems with prostitution in 1877, with the opening of a new military barracks. Under pressure from the local clergy to clean up the streets, a scheme was introduced whereby a bounty of five shillings was paid to night-watchmen for every successful conviction of a prostitute. Despite such efforts prostitution around military barracks continued. By the 1890s the road by the military barracks and the rifle range were notorious as places where prostitutes conducted their business. In April 1895 a suggestion was debated amongst the commissioners that a special vehicle should be used to transport these women to the jail which would save the police from the trouble that usually occurred after such arrests.

It is evident that prostitution flourished in and around garrisons with the full knowledge of the military officials who appear to have made no attempt to curb the vice. Throughout this period the Tipperary town commissioners received no support from military authorities in their attempts to curtail prostitution and they continued to wrestle unsuccessfully with the problem. The army wished for no interference from civilian authorities regarding the conduct of its troops but neither do they appear to have reprimanded soldiers for their behaviour. Indeed, they often obstructed the town commissioners' efforts to control prostitution. For example, in August 1883, the assistant street inspector, an employee of the commissioners, was assaulted by two soldiers whom he interrupted in the course of negotiations. The commissioners demanded that the Officer in Command give them every help in completing the identification of the culprits, including the name of a sergeant on the scene who could be called as a witness. Nothing came of the matter. A month later a young girl was raped by a soldier and the military authorities provided no co-operation in bringing the culprit to justice.[9]

The women who were camp followers were noted for the poor conditions in which they lived. The 'Bush', for example, was a wooded place near Cobh where "20 to 25 to 30 women ... lived ... all the year round under the furze like animals".[10] Dr. Curtis, who gave evidence to a select committee on the operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, stated the women "... are always moving about from Fermoy to Kinsale, and the garrison towns ... and sleeping under forts, and behind the barracks".[11]

Despite the clear public evidence of prostitution there was little open debate or discussion of the issue in the public arena throughout the nineteenth century. The only acknowledgements of its existence up to 1870

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appeared in the short annual reports of a few lay-run rescue homes, the publication of a couple of pamphlets relating to the Lock hospital and the annual returns of agencies such as the police, prison and hospital authorities, especially that of the Westmoreland Lock hospital, which treated women for venereal diseases.[12] After 1870 this changed somewhat with the emergence of a campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. By the 1880s discussions around purity and morality had found a place in such organisations as the Ladies National Association (Irish branch), the Young Men's Christian Association and the White Cross Vigilance Association. Attempts to inculcate purity among men and women were also carried out by Catholic agencies, particularly through confraternities.[13]

The popular image of the prostitute was, to say the least, sentimental. A prostitute was portrayed as a woman who had been 'ruined' through sexual experience. The most common scenario offered the image of a virtuous country girl who succumbed to her lover's advances and once taken was abandoned by him, reputation in tatters and no longer respectable; shamed before family and the world she had no other choice but to take to the depraved path of prostitution. It was from such tales, common in all the annual reports published by rescue agencies, that nineteenth-century popular culture created the stereotype of the 'seduced and abandoned woman'. [14]

Within the annual reports of rescue agencies, which were generally written for public consumption and often mirrored public attitudes towards prostitution, the belief that women were not to blame for their fate was often expressed (though blame was quickly apportioned once these women entered the Magdalen asylums).[15] Rather it was the keeping of bad company or other influences that were seen to have led them astray. In one Catholic institution it was the early neglect of prayer or the sacraments that was regarded as depriving the "... young girl of the only means of withstanding successfully the seductions of the world, and of forming habits of caution and restraint".[16] A 'fallen' woman was seen as a passive victim of male lust and unless rescued from her vile occupation she was destined not only for an early grave, but much worse, eternal damnation. Obviously the reasons why girls and women went into prostitution varied greatly, as did the uses they made of it and the relationship it had to the rest of their lives. The reformers' image of prostitution as an often irreversible descent into degradation was generally a simplistic analysis of a very complex reality.

Philanthropic activity in the area of rescue work was very popular throughout the last century and the majority of rescue or Magdalen homes, 12 out of 20, were operated by female religious.[17] In fact all lay Catholic institutions that had been established in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were eventually handed over to nuns who catered for thousands of women in their asylums. The Catholic hierarchy was adamant that the only worthwhile impact to be made on Magdalens could come from

nuns. The Good Shepherd sisters, for example, were specifically requested by the clergy to establish a Magdalen asylum in Cork city to meet the demand of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Likewise, a priest writing in 1890 believed that all lay Magdalen asylums were "... terrible failures from a complete want of discipline and moralising influences", and that 'fallen' women could not be reformed "... through *lay* or *amateur* agencies only".[18]

Nuns and prostitutes would appear to be worlds apart but were in fact connected in a variety of ways. One was through the definition of women in Irish society according to their sexual activity. There were three stereotypes: the nun, the mother and the 'fallen' woman.[19] Although the nun was the ideal, held out as a beacon by the Catholic hierarchy,[20] there are unexpected parallels between the lives of nuns and prostitutes. Both were removed from 'normal' society. Nuns voluntarily removed themselves and were also physically isolated by the limits placed upon public access to their convents. Similarly, 'fallen women' were often voluntary, and sometimes involuntary, outcasts in society and removed from the wider community. For example, prostitutes tended to congregate in particular areas of towns and cities where they created their own community networks. Likewise there was almost no public access to prostitutes in Magdalen asylums or homes. The behaviour of both nuns and prostitutes was also governed by men. Ultimate authority in convent life, and hence in the Magdalen asylums, rested with priests and bishops. For prostitutes on the streets, authority in the shape of prison and police officers governed their lives. There is a further similarity in the position of the nuns and the prostitutes within the Magdalen asylums. Both were denied individual expression of personality and sexuality: nuns because of their strict vows of obedience and celibacy, prostitutes as a condition of their penitence.

The Catholic discourse on prostitution was informed by the virginal and spiritual natures attributed to female religious. For society both groups epitomised the extremes of womanhood. The sexual identity of nuns and of prostitutes rested on their opposition, on their differences. The asexuality of one group and the obvious sexuality of the other defined these women's positions in society. A contemporary description of the arrival of a penitent at the gates of a religious run Magdalen asylum shows clearly this opposition:

With the tears of a penitent upon her young and sinful face, she turns to the portals of the church and there ... she finds the very ideal of purity - the highest, the grandest, the noblest of the Church's children. The woman who has never known the pollution of a single wicked thought - the woman whose virgin bosom has never been crossed by the shadow of a thought of sin! The woman breathing purity, innocence and grace, receives the woman whose breath is the pestilence of hell![21]

Another description, written more than 25 years later reiterates this oppositional comparison:

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Innocence and guilt face to face ... the bright cheerfulness of unsullied virtue so near to the most abject wretchedness of multiplied sinfulness! The spotless lily side by side with the foul smelling weed! The consecrated nun speaking to the polluted outcast![22]

There is an obvious dramatic confrontation between female 'purity' and 'impurity' within these asylums. Attempts were made within Magdalen homes to re-create the penitent in the image of the nun. The nun's own ideal of austerity and holiness was offered as the ideal for the 'rescued' penitent. In some asylums penitents could even join a Magdalen class, which meant they wore a habit, were 'consecrated' and took vows similar to those taken by lay sisters.[23]

From the records of Magdalen asylums it is clear that the standards expected of penitents were often unacceptable to many of the women. During the nineteenth century about 52% of women left these asylums voluntarily. It seems clear also that many of the women who entered asylums used them as a temporary refuge until other options became available to them.[24] 'Prostitution' evolved in the nineteenth century as a particular construction and the discourse was defined by middle-class reformers, and in Ireland by Catholic rescue workers in particular. The problem of prostitution as reformers, rescue workers and indeed 'respectable' society defined it had no necessary relation to the experience of the women involved. One group of women who clearly ignored middle-class notions of female sexuality and 'respectability' were the 'wrens of the Curragh'.

The 'wrens of the Curragh' were the most 'notorious' of the bands of women who were camp followers. The 'wrens', so called because 'they live[d] in holes in the banks [ditches]'[25], actually lived in makeshift huts along the perimeter of the Curragh army camp in county Kildare. The numbers of women living in these conditions varied, but up to 60 women were reported to live there at any one time. Many of these were undoubtedly prostitutes but it is probable that some, at least, were also involved in long-standing common-law relationships with soldiers, since it was the practice of the army authorities at this time not to recognise soldiers' marriages unless they were living in married quarters in the camp. The sources indicate that these women were living in the Curragh from the 1840s although it was not until 1856 that a permanent military camp was established with up to 6000 soldiers attached. The existence of the 'wrens' was still apparent in the 1880s.[26]

The information we have available on the 'wrens' is quite unique in the history of Irish prostitution. In 1867 a journalist, James Greenwood, from the British newspaper the *Pall Mall Gazette*, came to investigate how the 'wrens' lived.[27] Much of his account is sensationalist but if we look closely at the text some idea of the extraordinary circumstances of these women's lives can be gained. There is little independent evidence to corroborate

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Greenwood's detailed account of these women's lives, and what exists tends to deal with the 'wrens' as trespassers, or encroachers on army discipline. While Greenwood's articles reflect some of the beliefs and fears held by the Irish middle class about prostitutes and prostitution his account was formed outside the dominant Catholic discourse which prevailed in Ireland at the time these articles were written. The discourse was informed much more by English middle-class expectations of prostitution and lacked the sanctimoniousness Irish accounts generally proclaim. It was also an account written principally for an English audience.[28]

To provide some idea of their living conditions, which were quite primitive to say the least, here is an extract from Greenwood's account:

Altogether, there are ten bushes, with about sixty inhabitants. In them they sleep, cook, eat, drink, receive visits, and perform all the various offices of life. If they are sick, there they lie. Brothers, mothers and fathers go to see them there. There sometimes - such occurrences do happen - they lie in child-bed; and there sometimes they die ... the nests have an interior space of about nine feet long by seven feet broad; and the roof is not more than four and a half feet from the ground ... They are rough, misshapen domes of furze .. the walls are some twenty inches thick ... there is no chimney - not even a hole in the roof, which generally slopes forward. The smoke of the turf fire which burns on the floor of the hut has to pass out the door when the wind is favourable, and to leak slowly through the crannied walls when it is not. The door is a narrow opening nearly the height of the structure - a slit in it, kept open by two rude posts, which also serve to support the roof. To keep it down, and secure from the winds that drive over the Curragh so furiously, sods of earth are placed on top, here and there, with a piece of corrugated iron ... as an additional protection from rain. Flooring there is none of any kind whatever, nor any attempt to make the den snugger by burrowing down into the bosom of the earth ... Wind and rain are their worst enemies the huts fall towards this side and that; they shrink in and down upon the outcast wretches that huddle in them; and the doorposts don't keep the roof up and the clods don't keep it down: the nest is nothing but a furzy hole, such as, for comfort, any wild beast may match anywhere; leaving cleanliness out of the question ...[29]

Though the living conditions of these women may have left a lot to be desired it is obvious that the way in which they structured their community was quite unique. They certainly did not form a family unit in the accepted Victorian sense of the word where 'family' meant a nuclear or extended family, consisting of husband, wife and children, and outside that close family relatives. Greenwood, in his articles, imposed the title 'family' on the women implying their normality and of course disavowing the radical structure of their living circumstances. The community life of the 'wrens' was organised around women and children; men did not live with them. At

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the time of Greenwood's visit there were four children living in the nests and he observed that "... a baby is obviously regarded as conferring a certain respectability upon the nest it belongs to, and is treated, like other possessions, as common property".[30] The women also remained independent of, and removed from, the local community. They tried as far as possible to cater for their own needs and it was only in times of utter necessity, such as severe illness, that they sought refuge in public institutions such as the workhouse.[31]

The 'wrens', in fact, existed as a subgroup of women removed from, and at variance with, 'respectable' society. It is clear that these women helped each other in times of distress. "In sickness", Greenwood noted, "the wrens administer to themselves or each other such remedies as they happen to believe in, or are able to procure ..."[32]

Since the 'colony' as it was called, existed over such a long period of time structures had developed which made the place, in some sense, a haven for women who wished to live this kind of existence, away from the institutions of society, their families and possibly all the constraints that went with these. A bond of solidarity existed among the 50 or 60 women who occupied the nests. As Greenwood noted:

The ruling principle here is to share each other's fortunes, and in a happy-go-lucky style. Thus the colony is open to any poor wretch who imagines that she can find comfort in it, or another desperate chance of existence. Come she whence she may, she has only to present herself to be admitted into one nest or another, nor is it necessary that she bring a penny to recommend her ...[33]

It was not only camp followers who lived at the Curragh. Harvesters were also to be found there. The 'wren' population seemed to be a floating one. Many of the women apparently returned to Dublin during the winter and reappeared at the Curragh again for the summer months, when outdoor life could at least be a little more tolerable. Women who had warrants against them for trespass or other offences also vacated the area, often to return later when such matters, it was hoped, were forgotten.[34]

These women could act for their own support and in their own defence on a collective basis, they engaged in a form of survival, as did many other women, who lived marginal economic lives in the last century. It is obvious that a definite system of collective action operated in this community:

In hard times one family readily helps another, or several help one ...  
None of these women have any money of their own. What each company get is thrown into a common purse, and the nest is provisioned out of it ... It is an understanding that they take it in turns to do the marketing, and to keep house when the rest go wandering at night ...[35]

Economically they depended on the soldiers to a certain extent for survival, but they were not entirely dependent on the trade of ill-paid soldiers, they



also knitted garments which they sold at markets to support themselves. Their attitude to sexuality was business like, particularly noteworthy is the fact that the younger and better looking of the women and “the girl whose dress is the freshest” were the ones who engaged in business with the soldiers, the others remaining behind in the nests to do chores or look after the children. Once the business was done the women “... put off their decent clothes immediately they have no further use for them as *ornaments*”.[36]

Undoubtedly the lives these women led were harsh and it would be misleading to romanticise them. Their physical circumstances were uncomfortable and their financial resources limited. Alcohol abuse was rife and subsistence existence was the norm. The women were allowed to attend a market held in the camp three days a week and there was only one shop in the locality, run by a widow, which would serve them. Their purchases consisted of:

... bread, potatoes, milk, candles ... Other women made purchases of tobacco, tea and sugar ... Fresh meat is a rare luxury ... Nor is tobacco a luxury merely. That weed is a well known stifer of hunger - a fact which the wren discovers for herself before long.[37]

Greenwood noted that the majority of the women were aged between 17 and 25 years. Throughout the last century prostitution in Ireland was generally an occupation for women between 20 and 30 years of age.[38] Some had run away from home to escape parental control, others preferred prostitution to work as domestic servants or farm workers. Prostitution attracted women because they had so few other means to support themselves. It was an economic choice dictated most often, but not necessarily, by extreme need. As an occupation it cannot be understood apart from women's problems in supporting themselves in nineteenth century Irish society.

For Greenwood, as for many individuals in the last century, the ‘wrens’ were seen most often as less than human. For example Greenwood was curious to know “... how ... she came from being a woman to be turned into a wren”, the language immediately implying a loss of humanity. According to Greenwood:

the story began with ‘no father nor mother’, an aunt who kept a whisky-store in Cork, an artilleryman who came to the whisky-store, and saw and seduced the girl. By-and-by his regiment was ordered to the Curragh. The girl followed him, being then with child. ‘He blamed me for following him’, said she. ‘He’d have nothing to do with me. He told me to come here and do like other women did. And what could I do? My child was born here, in this very place, and glad I was of the shelter, and glad I was when the child died - thank the blessed Mary! What could I do with a child? His father was sent away from here and a good riddance. He used me very bad’.[39]

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It is the typical seduction story to be found in all the 'case histories' provided in the annual reports of Irish rescue agencies. It seems clear from the document that these women did not see themselves as victims. "It wasn't one man brought me here, but many!"[40] stated one of the women defiantly and they may very well have constructed stories to appeal to Greenwood's preconceptions.

Many individuals could hold contradictory views simultaneously about prostitutes and prostitution. This is particularly evident within the Magdalen asylums which operated in this period.[41] We can see some contradictions in Greenwood's account. First of all he included the stereotypical image of the seduced and abandoned woman. He also noted that the 'wrens' tended to spend the day lounging, "in a half naked state". Their everyday dress consisted of a frieze petticoat, with another petticoat thrown over their shoulders. In the evenings they put on better clothes, a cotton gown, petticoat and stockings. His remarks on their attire are interesting:

... the difference in the appearance of these poor wretches when the gown and petticoat are donned and when they are taken off again answers precisely to their language and demeanour when sober and when tipsy. In the one condition they are generally as well behaved and civil as any decent peasant women need be; in the other they are like raging savages, with more than a savage's vileness.[42]

Throughout the nineteenth and indeed the twentieth centuries, moral meanings were attached to certain kinds of clothes. When the 'wrens' dressed respectably they became human and were more like 'real women'. Ironically it was in these clothes that the 'wrens' plied their trade, a trade that negated them as women

The 'wrens' as women working as prostitutes were also recognisably different to 'real' women. Among the 'wrens' Greenwood noted that there:

... was a common look, shocking to see, of hard depravity - the look of hopeless, miserable, but determined and defiant wickedness. Fine faces, and young ones too, were marred into something quite terrible by this look, and the spirit of it seemed to move in the lazy swing of their limbs, and was certainly heard in their voices.[43]

The very dress and demeanour of these women were a sign of their rebellion from 'respectable' society. These contradictory images of the prostitute, and image was an important factor in their construction, firstly as an innocent, abandoned woman and therefore 'real' and consequently as a hardened creature were held simultaneously. They served perhaps to reconcile beliefs about women's innate purity with the reality of a prostitute's life.

Unsurprisingly there was little toleration of their lifestyles within the local community. One contemporary commentator stated that the 'wrens' were the "very dregs of their degraded class".[44] A contributor to Charles Dickens' *All the Year Round*, writing of a visit he had made to the area in

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the 1840s, stated that it was "... quite common for the priest, when he met one of them ['wrens'] to seize her and cut her hair off close".[45] Similarly local shopkeepers would not serve them in their shops. 'Respectable' society was generally reluctant to see them as anything other than outcast. Their outcast status is further emphasised by the fact that one 'gentleman' remarked to Greenwood with apparent amazement that they used "cups and saucers just like ordinary people".[46]

As well as being subject to ostracism these women were also regularly harassed and victimised. A 'correspondent' wrote to the *Pall Mall Gazette* with a vivid description of the treatment of the 'wrens' by local soldiers:

The inclemency of the season is not the very worst thing to which the women are exposed. Hunger and cold are sad assailants, but they suffer even more from the brutality and recklessness of the soldiers. To be knocked down and kicked by fellows half mad with drink is an everyday occurrence ... Nesting was not the only amusement with which the miserable sisterhood furnished privates Ramrod, Bit, Spur ... 'Driving the wrens', as the phrase went twelve or thirteen years ago, was no unusual pastime. Gentlemen fresh from the hospital, with others who had been jilted or robbed, were always ready to organise parties for this purpose, nor were these avengers ever at a loss for recruits. Generally speaking the 'fun of the thing' was irresistible. After evening stables - half-past seven to eight o'clock - the gang, usually a pretty large one, mustered, and well armed with pieces of turf, cabbage stalks, and similar missiles, marched to the scene of action. That attained, supposing the evening to be a wet one, a general rush of the mob would tumble the frail edifices about the ears of the occupants, who received an unmerciful pelting as they bolted from the ruins. A dry summer or autumn evening, however, was preferred for perpetrating these acts of wantonness. Of course at these times the huts would be inflammable, as so much tinder, and the application of a match would in a very few moments wrap the whole structure in flames. When this happened those inside would dash not only through the door, but through the sides of the burning nest, and plunge along among the mocking cheers and ready missiles of their tormentors, carrying with them in their hair and clothes burning fragments of the wreck. What loss or injury they sustained by these amusements nobody cared...[47]

The publication of Greenwood's account of the 'wrens' led to an increase in formal institutional control over these women's lives. One immediate consequence was the introduction of the Curragh of Kildare Act which enabled the army authorities to regulate more fully the access of women to the camp. The Curragh also came under the control of the Contagious Diseases Acts and a lock hospital, to treat the women, was established in the camp in 1868. The provision of the lock hospital was deemed, by a supporter of the system, a great success in reclaiming and rescuing those

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women who entered it for treatment. "The general forbearance of the officials", it was noted, "was rewarded by observing a gradual change for the better, in proportion to the length and frequency of the patients living in [the] hospital".[48] The army attempted to do its bit, through the lock hospital chaplain, by encouraging those women who had completed their treatment to return to their places of origin. The military authorities appear to have provided some funding for this purpose though one cleric in the area felt obliged to inform the camp commander that he had "... no confidence in the means proposed to effect the object required".[49] In 1873 a concerted effort was made to finally rid the vicinity of the camp of these women but it succeeded only in driving them onto the roads and into the neighbouring towns and villages, much to the consternation of the local inhabitants.[50] An increase in surveillance and sanctions did not mean that the women left the area of the camp completely, but their numbers were significantly reduced.

For the 'wrens' of the Curragh it can be argued that their lifestyle was an economic and a social choice. That the women garnered so few profits from the situation only reinforced the basic flaw in prostitution: it did not prove a profitable life for the workers regardless of the circumstances. They traded sexual favours with men for food, drink and money and they also created their own communal system of living. For them prostitution was a means of self-support and independence and a chance to live an autonomous existence.

Prostitutes faced continual social and community ostracism in a society that viewed them as a social evil. They were ostracised morally from the dominant Catholic culture. They were victimised by the local inhabitants. Society saw them as worthless beings whose salvation, viewed primarily in religious terms, was the key to restoring their humanity. While they may have been 'outcasts' from society I would argue that the situation of the 'wrens', in particular the ways in which they created their own subculture, allowed them emotional and physical support, a certain degree of protection and indeed human validation. The creation of their own community also provided a valuable means of defending themselves against social devaluation. Prostitutes were not passive victims and showed themselves to be pragmatic about the conditions of their lives. They spent their efforts in capitalising on their own survival. The 'wrens' of the Curragh showed a definite inclination to extricate themselves from society at large and expended their energies on creating their own community support network.

### Notes

- [1] For the image of nuns as women see Caitriona Clear (1987) *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan) There were numerous sermons preached and published on the importance of domesticity in nineteenth century Ireland by both Catholic and Protestant clergymen. See, for example, Rev. John

Gregg (1856) *Women: a lecture* (Dublin; Rev. Bernard O'Reilly (n.d.) *The Mirror of True Womanhood* (Dublin). This book was an advice manual for Catholic women. It was originally published in America in 1877 and went through 13 editions there. See also the influential work of Rev. Thomas Burke (n.d.,c. 1870s) *Ireland's Vindication: refutation of Froude and other lectures, historical and religious* (London).

- [2] For further information on these sources see Maria Luddy (1990) Prostitution and rescue work in nineteenth century Ireland, in Maria Luddy & Cliona Murphy (Eds) *Women Surviving: studies in Irish women's history in the 19th and 20th centuries*, pp. 80-84 (Dublin: Poolbeg Press).
- [3] *Abstract of the Census for Ireland, 1841* [459], H.C. 1843, li, 319.
- [4] These figures are compiled from the *Dublin Metropolitan Police Statistics* (Dublin, various years, 1838-1900) and the *Judicial and Criminal Statistics for Ireland, 1871-1900*.
- [5] The figures declined quite dramatically from this year due to a number of factors amongst which were increased police vigilance, the large number of moral reform organisations that appeared in the cities and also the high rate of emigration which allowed women to find work in other countries.
- [6] Ms 1054 Kilmainham Papers (National Library of Ireland), p. 290.
- [7] Quoted in W. S. Mason (1814/16/19) *A Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland*, 3 vols, iii, p. 79 (Dublin).
- [8] John Finegan (1978) *The Story of Monto: an account of Dublin's notorious red light district* (Cork: Mercier Press).
- [9] D. G. Marnane (1985) *Land and Violence: a history of West Tipperary from 1660*, pp. 72-3, 112, 117 (Tipperary: The Author).
- [10] Evidence of Dr Curtis, *House of Commons Select Committee on the Administration, Operation and Effects of the Contagious Diseases Acts*, 1882 (340), ix, Qs. 11,256, 11,275.
- [11] *Ibid.*, Q. 11,278.
- [12] Those rescue agencies run by Catholic female religious rarely published accounts of their work but information about their asylums is available in the annals kept by convents. Accounts of their operations were often furnished to the bishop of the diocese.
- [13] For further information on these organisations see Maria Luddy *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, Ch.5 (unpublished PhD, NUI, 1989).
- [14] This imagery is to be found in all the available annual reports of rescue agencies and published accounts of the work of nuns in this area. See, for example, Anon. (1897) *The magdalens of High Park, Irish Rosary*.
- [15] Luddy, Prostitution and rescue work, pp. 69-76.
- [16] *Abstract Report and Statistical Sketch of the Magdalen Asylum, High Park, Drumcondra*, p. 17 (Dublin, 1881).
- [17] It is difficult to be certain of the number of such homes which actually existed. Many refuges changed their titles over the years. Some

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institutions ran for very short periods of time and other organisations, which were apparently rescue homes, were not for prostitutes at all.

[18] Letter dated July 1890, signed Archdeacon P. Murray Papers File 31/7-9 Ordinary (Dublin Dioscean Archives). Emphasis in the original.

[19] Some attempt to begin the analysis of the religious role of lay Catholic women has begun with P. J. Corish (1991) Women and religious practice, in Margaret MacCurtain & Mary O'Dowd (Eds) *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, pp. 212-220 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

[20] Rev. Thomas Burke, The attributes of Catholic charity, in idem., *Ireland's Vindication*.

[21] Ibid., p. 21.

[22] Anon., Magdalens of High Park, p. 179.

[23] The system of Magdalen classes was operated in those homes run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge in Drumcondra and Gloucester St, Dublin and also in those asylums run by the Good Shepherd Sisters. See Luddy, *Prostitution and Rescue Work*, pp. 76-77.

[24] Ibid., pp. 78-80.

[25] James Greenwood (1867) *The Wren of the Curragh*, p. 2 (London: Tinsley Brothers).

[26] Con Costello (1991) *Kildare: saints, soldiers and horses*, pp. 115-140 (Naas: Leinster Leader).

[27] The account first appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 15, 16, 17 and 19 October 1867. It was later published by Greenwood as *The Wren of the Curragh* and he also included a piece on the 'wrens' in his *The Seven Curses of London*, pp. 292-303 (London, 1869). For a short description of life for the 'wrens' see Padraic O'Farrell (1987) Camp followers of the Curragh, *Irish Times*, 31 January and Con Costello (1990) Bushwomen of the Curragh, *Leinster Leader*, 27 January. The material quoted in this present article is taken from Greenwood's *The Wren of the Curragh*.

[28] There are some obvious similarities in these discourses. The fear of prostitutes as a polluting force was a common theme, their lack of womanly qualities, their defiance of 'respectability' were other themes.

[29] Greenwood, *The Wren of the Curragh*, pp. 14-17.

[30] Ibid., p. 29.

[31] Ibid., p. 30. Generally women who were very ill were brought to the Naas workhouse. In 1863 there was a delay in moving one of the women to the workhouse and she died. The relieving officer was later charged with manslaughter. 'Stoning the desolate, *All the Year Round*, vol. xii (1865).

[32] Greenwood, *The Wren of the Curragh*, p. 30.

[33] Ibid., p. 27.

[34] Ms 1069, Kilmainham Papers (National Library of Ireland), p. 313.

[35] Greenwood, *The Wren of the Curragh*, p. 31.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., p. 36.

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[38] Luddy, *Prostitution and Rescue Work*, pp. 52-57.

[39] Greenwood, *The Wren of the Curragh*, pp. 44-45.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[41] While in the public discourse these penitents were generally treated as victims, within the institutions themselves blame for their past behaviour was laid firmly on their shoulders. In one asylum the title 'penitent' was always used when referring to these women to impress upon them the true meaning of their sins. *Abstract Report*, p. 25.

[42] Greenwood, *The Wren of the Curragh*, p. 26.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[44] M. C. Hime (1872) *The Moral Utility of a Lock Hospital*, p. 1 (Dublin).

[45] *Stoning the desolate*, p. 370.

[46] Greenwood, *The Wren of the Curragh*, pp. 34-35.

[47] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 October 1867.

[48] Hime, *Moral Utility*, p. 4.

[49] Ms 1066, Kilmainham Papers (National Library of Ireland), pp. 133, 135, 149, 154, 157, 161.

[50] Ms 1069, Kilmainham Papers (National Library of Ireland), p. 313.