
“Abandoned Women and Bad Characters”: prostitution in nineteenth-century Ireland

MARIA LUDDY

University of Warwick, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT This article examines the extent of prostitution in nineteenth-century Ireland. It centres on the problem of prostitution as one of visibility and the prostitute as a site of possible contagion, both physical and moral. The legal powers given to the police to control prostitution were used when prostitution became a particular problem and the focus of public and clerical condemnation. However, for the public prostitution was most acceptable when it was hidden from public view. Attempts to rescue and reform prostitutes came from lay and religious women in particular. The establishment of Magdalen Asylums offered the Irish public a place of confinement for their ‘wayward’ daughters, placing them away from the public gaze. Examining the registers of these asylums reveals that ‘fallen women’ were capable of using these institutions for their own ends, particularly in the nineteenth century. The decline in prostitution evident in Ireland from the 1870s owed much to the new ‘morality’ being imposed on the Irish people by the middle classes and the Catholic church.

In 1835 a flourishing red light district operated in a maze of back alleys and lanes between Aungier street and St Stephen’s Green in Dublin. One of the occupants of this district petitioned the Lord Lieutenant to restore order to this “nursery of human turpitude and hotbed of depravity [where prostitutes] in a state of nudity openly and wantonly assailed the most respectable persons”.^[1] The police however, claimed that there was little they could do and the area continued as a centre of perceived immorality. This instance of individual action reveals both the public concern for, and police tolerance of, prostitution in the nineteenth century. Prostitutes clearly had a very public presence in Ireland in the nineteenth century and it was most often their visibility which caused anxiety. Concern with the visibility of prostitutes suggested fears about the use of public space, and perhaps more importantly, the contamination of that space. Many of the discussions which developed around prostitution in the period 1800-1900, focused on the idea of contagion, either in the spread of disease or immorality. In this article I want to examine the public reaction to prostitution in Ireland, and to look at

MARIA LUDDY

how prostitution and prostitutes were described by the police, clergy, medical and legal profession and by the rescue worker.

Prostitution existed publicly in the streets, and less openly, in the brothels and public houses of the towns and cities of Ireland. For many women prostitution was a way of life, for others it was a casual occupation. It is difficult to provide accurate figures of the numbers of women who worked as prostitutes in any given period. Estimates of the numbers of women engaged in this business varied according to who was telling the story and what particular point they were trying to make. William Logan, a mission worker from Leeds who visited Ireland in 1845, noted that Cork allegedly contained eighty-five regular brothels and 356 public prostitutes. He also remarked that in Cork "a large number of procuresses abound ... Individuals", he stated, "have been known to tender their daughters and other relatives to brothel keepers for money".[2] Noting that even prostitution paid homage to class distinctions, Logan also mentioned that there were thought to be one hundred "privateers" who operated from houses not designated as brothels. Indeed the social hierarchy of prostitutes mirrored the class structure of society itself. The Rev. Maguire, in evidence given to a commission on the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1871, also noted the class distinctions which existed among prostitutes. In Furze's alley in Cork he outlined the existence of women "of the most abandoned and low class which generally went with soldiers and sailors".[3] There also existed three brothels in North Street. These were filled with what he called "the upper class of that portion of the community, the class who do not go after the ordinary men".[4] Information provided to Logan in Dublin allowed for 1,700 prostitutes operating in the city, while Belfast was deemed to have 236 prostitutes residing in brothels there.[5] Arrests for prostitution in Ireland between 1870 and 1900 went from 3,673 in 1870, to 2,186 in 1885, to a low of 656 by 1900.[6] Not all women who worked as prostitutes would have been arrested, but women who were believed by the police to be prostitutes were also to be found amongst other women arrested. For example, in 1871 the police instigated proceedings against 17,153 women whom they deemed "bad characters". These included vagrants, drunkards, and thieves, but 10,456 or 61% were labelled prostitutes.[7] The number of women arrested for offences other than soliciting in 1870 included 11,864 women thought to be prostitutes. That figure had declined to 2,970 by 1900.[8]

That prostitution was a considerable problem in Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland can be gauged by the fact that by 1835 there were at least eleven rescue homes, or Magdalen asylums, attempting to reform prostitutes in Dublin.[9] These existed along with other refuges which took in destitute women. Other Magdalen asylums operated around the country, one even being opened in the small market town of Tralee in 1854 and operated by the Sisters of Mercy. Prostitutes were also to be found in large numbers in

PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY IRELAND

all the workhouses of the country. Indeed many guardians feared that some women gained access to the workhouse for the sole purpose of procuring.[10] Towns which housed garrisons also accommodated women who worked as prostitutes. A parochial survey of Athlone published in the early nineteenth century noted the immorality which existed there 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 moral [ity], 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.[11]

Isaac Weld, writing of the garrison town of Roscommon in 1832, noted:

that the evil [prostitution] was of far greater magnitude than it appeared at first view. In Castle street, on the skirts of the town, there was actually a range of brothels, at the doors of which females stood, at noonday, to entice passengers, with gestures too plain to be misunderstood.[12]

In 1847 a Colonel More, writing from Newbridge, which he claimed was "infested with prostitutes", sought advice from his superiors on how to punish these women who "... climb over the barracks wall".[13]

The Irish authorities appear generally to have taken a complacent attitude to prostitution. However, there were, at times, efforts made to clear the streets of prostitutes. For example, the *Freeman's Journal* reported in 1855 that a magistrate complained that Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) efforts to clear prostitutes from French street, were of dubious value since it merely had the effect of dispersing the prostitutes into "respectable locales". This paper again reported the case of police action in June 1857. The DMP, aware of the existence of a brothel above a cigar shop in Duke street, rather than shutting it down, simply warned "respectable persons" of the nature of the establishment. In May 1880 the same paper noted that the suppression of 17 brothels by the police in Bull Lane led merely to the dispersion of the women rather than the suppression of prostitution.[14]

In the 1870s a more concerted effort was made by the DMP to close down some brothels. These attempts may have been occasioned by the Contagious Diseases Acts legislation and were often instigated and supported by the public and by the clergy. The senior surgeon of the Westmoreland Lock hospital reported to a committee of inquiry into the CDAs of the methods used by the police in the 1870s. He stated:

Almost all the houses of ill fame were in a street called French street, and another street called Clarendon street; French street is very close to the square in which I live ... St Stephens's Green Park, and we did not like to have such people near us, and we were anxious to close it. Clarendon street is the locale of a very beautiful chapel, and the priests

MARIA LUDDY

did not like to have them there. The result was that police were put at the doors and took down the names of every one who came; these were what we would call the upper class ... and the police took down the names of all gentlemen going to enter, and that at once drove them out of that, and then they went to the banks of the canal. But they were removed from there, and the result is that they are scattered in different outlying parts[15]

McNamara did not believe that this action by the police made any impact upon the extent of prostitution. Police activity was often a pretence of vigilance. It was when prostitution involved violence, disturbed the public peace or became too noticeable that it became an issue of public, and hence of police, concern.

The police had many legal codes to help them deal with prostitutes, though there was no legal definition of what constituted a prostitute and prostitution itself was not outlawed. For example, under the Police Clauses Acts of 1847 a woman deemed to be "a common prostitute or night walker loitering or importuning passengers for the purpose of prostitution", could be arrested.[16] That section was extended under the Towns' Improvements Acts of 1854 to include women being "otherwise offensive".[17] Women found themselves, under the Towns' Improvement Act, in the company of all kinds of individuals trying to earn a living, such as fortune tellers, performers, and beggars. These were individuals who were deemed possible or capable of causing public disorder. This section provided the police with broad discretionary powers of arrest. Women could also be taken up under the vagrancy laws. There were also laws against keeping bawdy houses or brothels. The role of the state in monitoring sexual behaviour was practically confined to arrests for public prostitution and solicitation, and hence singled out the lowliest class of prostitutes, those who peddled their wares in the streets, for arrest.

It was however, under the Contagious Diseases Acts that the broadest powers were given to the police. As is well known, Parliament passed the first of three statutes which permitted the compulsory inspection of prostitutes for venereal disease in certain military camps in both England and Ireland in 1864. In Ireland the areas designated "subjected districts" were Cork, Cobh and the Curragh camp. In effect the acts subjected women who were on the street to arbitrary and compulsory medical examination. If the woman inspected was infected she was forcibly detained in a Lock hospital for a period of up to nine months and registered as a prostitute. As a result of the introduction of the Acts Lock hospitals were established in both Cork and the Curragh in 1869.

The Acts, which applied only to women, were intended to stop the spread of venereal diseases. They remained in force until 1883 when they were suspended and were finally repealed in 1886. In legal terms there was no definition of what constituted a prostitute. It was assumed by the

PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY IRELAND

authorities that a prostitute was automatically identifiable. All that was necessary to prove an allegation of this type was for the police to testify before a local magistrate that he had seen the woman solicit a man. Women who were arrested and summonsed were ordered to be examined at a certified hospital. If they refused to be examined they could be imprisoned for a month. There was no cure for venereal diseases in the nineteenth century and treatment involved the use of mercury, itself a poison. The symptoms of venereal disease was not always obvious in women and often these symptoms disappeared leaving doctors to believe they had effected a cure.[18] It could be argued that the women who worked as prostitutes in the subjected districts were permitted to continue their business provided they allowed themselves to be examined, and if necessary treated, for venereal diseases. Those women who worked as prostitutes outside the subjected districts continued to be taken up under legislation dealing with vagrancy and disorderly conduct.

Public discussion of prostitution became more common during the period of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Amongst women it was the advocates of women's rights who became directly involved in a public discussion about sexuality. There were both supporters and opponents of the Acts in Ireland. Among the supporters were members of the medical profession. In November 1869 the Dublin Journal of Medical Science expressed the hope that the Acts would be extended to the civil population "amongst whom they would prove as beneficial as they have already in the case of soldiers and sailors".[19]

Organised opposition to the Acts did not emerge until 1869 when the government proposed to extend them. In that year the National Anti-Contagious Diseases Acts Extensions Association, better known as the National Association, was formed. Women established their own organisation, the Ladies National Association, led by Josephine Butler. In England repeal groups proliferated between 1870 and 1884, and in Ireland too, branches of the National Association and the LNA were formed.[20] While many of the societies in England worked in their specific localities the organisations in Ireland worked on a national basis.

In Ireland membership of the repeal association was generally confined to Anglicans, Quakers, Presbyterians, Wesleyan Methodists and Congregationalists. Many of the members of the LNA, Anna Haslam and Isabelle Tod for example, were leading activists in political campaigns to improve the position of women in society.[21] Opposition to the Acts from religious bodies came mostly from within the nonconformist churches whose members saw them as symbolising an acceptance of the double standard of sexual morality. The Presbyterian church in Ireland was particularly opposed to the Acts. Issues of morality and prostitution were discussed at its General Assembly every year between 1871 and 1883. In addition to these

MARIA LUDDY

discussions the Assembly also presented an annual petition to parliament calling for the repeal of the acts on the grounds that they:

were calculated to inflict such bodily and mental suffering on a helpless class of the community, to outrage their feelings, deaden their sensibilities and to infringe upon their constitutional rights, while the efficacy of these acts is, to say the least, extremely doubtful.[22]

Public awareness of the Acts in Ireland appears to have been limited as so few areas were affected by the legislation. There was opposition in Ireland to the campaign against the Acts vociferously led by the *Freeman's Journal* which criticized Irish women in particular for taking part in the repeal campaign. The Catholic cleric, the Rev. Maguire noted that "there are a great many ladies who exert themselves very much, and we do not approve of them putting up placards before young females inviting them to read these Acts, of which women never heard before. They stop before these things and read the whole production and then begin to talk of it." [23]

The women who were active in the movement in Ireland were predominantly Quakers and Presbyterians. They organised petitions, deputations, lobbying, at homes, leafleting and writing to the newspapers to rally support for the cause in Ireland. There seems to have been little pamphlet literature published in Ireland about the Acts, though Thomas Haslam, a noted suffragist, published a pamphlet about the CDAs in 1870. Here he analysed the causes of prostitution as lying to some degree in the lack of occupations open to women and the poor pay of some men which did not allow them to marry, drink is also an added factor and society's attitudes to women who are "the victims of seduction" further complicated the problem. But he maintained that "it is men's unchastity and men's injustice which are mainly responsible for this crying wrong". The CDAs were, he wrote, "a dangerous piece of legislative bungling" and he called for their immediate repeal or radical amendment.[24]

The women's campaign made it clear that they wanted a single standard of morality, one based upon women's ideals. As Isabella Tod wrote:

the greatest and most consistent force at work, both in lowering the moral tone throughout all classes, and in bringing about not only individual acts of vice, but in degrading a number of women into a class where occupation is vice, is that unspeakably wicked idea that most men may be expected so to sin, and that in them it is a venial offence We must utterly refuse ... to acknowledge the existence of any such class of men, in any rank, as inevitable; or any class of women to meet their horrible demands We owe a duty to men ... to awaken their consciences to pull down the selfish screen which society has set up We have the power of the newly awakened conscience of women, as to

PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY IRELAND

their duty to protect their poorer and weaker sisters, and to withstand and enlighten those who would seek to assail them.[25]

Before the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts the powers of the police were further strengthened by the introduction of the Industrial Schools Amendment Act of 1880 which allowed them to remove children from brothels, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 which gave the police power to summarily convict brothel keepers and allowed imprisonment for repeated offences.[26] By the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth century there were more concerted efforts to clear the streets of prostitutes, often at the instigation of the public. The Catholic cleric, the Rev. Henry Reed, noted that rousing public opinion helped to close certain brothels in Cork city in the 1870s. He reported that:

we caused a good deal of excitement about the neighbourhood. We went, supported by a number of respectable men, belonging to the confraternity. We walked about in the neighbourhood; no man would be seen going near these brothels. That acted on the neighbourhood and also on the landlords, who would not keep these people in the houses.[27]

Similarly the Church of Ireland linked White Cross Vigilance Association, which made its appearance in Dublin in 1885, organised patrols to combat the evils of prostitution. The WCVA, which had an entirely male membership, pledged, among other things, to "maintain the laws of purity as equally binding on men and women".[28] Besides attending lectures members of the association engaged in "patrol work". In effect this meant keeping watch outside known "evil houses" and through such harassment forcing them to close. In 1888 one brothel owner, it was reported, offered a bribe of £1,000 to the members of a patrol if they would desist in watching his premises.[29] In 1891 the association claimed to have fourteen branches in Dublin with 530 members.[30] Through the activities of this movement thirty-five brothels were claimed to have been closed down and Mecklenberg street cleared of prostitutes in the 1890s.[31]

That there was some public concern about prostitution is without doubt. But in many instances the public had an ambivalent attitude to prostitution. As is clear from the opposition to the CDAs there appear to have been few prepared to discuss the issue publicly or to demand that prostitution must be brought to an end. That no absolute sexual moral standard was enforced regarding prostitution is evident from the fact that the most common concern about prostitution was its visibility. A correspondent to the *Freeman's Journal* in 1866, as part of a series of correspondence to that paper regarding the "irrepressible evil", noted that "for the purpose of decency they [prostitutes] should be kept out of the vicinity of the public ways".[32] In the late 1850s there was a long

MARIA LUDDY

correspondence between the inhabitants of the Curragh and the army authorities. The main problem concerned a group of women who frequented the area between French Furze and the army camp. The inhabitants were not concerned with getting rid of the women but rather in removing them to "some more remote place". Once that was done the locality could be traversed by the inhabitants without witnessing the "disgusting scenes daily presented".[33] A report of their condition, written in April 1878, noted the 'nuisance' caused by the women when they roamed freely in the area:

at present the prostitutes are scattered about, some residing in a lane near the Curragh in the direction of Kilcullen. These frequent the edge of the Curragh at Athgarvan and are a great source of annoyance as they remain on the roads and give money to the soldiers to purchase spirits for them They used to live in French Furze. When there it was noted that they were, with few exceptions, all in one place, and were more easily kept under control, without harassing the police as is now the case, and gave but little annoyance to the public.[34]

Containment and visibility were the issues which surfaced in attempts to deal with prostitution in Ireland. The Rev. Maguire, a priest in Cork city, informed the Contagious Diseases Acts commission of 1871 about his attitude to prostitution. He declared that the Catholic clergy would not allow prostitutes to operate. The clergy's activities in Cork were directed very much at encouraging these women to enter the Magdalen asylums. However, the Catholic clergy also tried to contain the problem as much as possible. Maguire stated to the commission:

I hold that if I had power myself, I would not allow a woman at all in the streets. I would compel them to reside inside such localities as those I have named. I would say that knowing our people, and knowing, generally speaking, the virtue that is in them, that half our married men and half our youths would be preserved from misfortune if they did not meet these unfortunate women in the streets. ... It is the looseness and freedom of these women who can walk the streets at night that, generally speaking, have tended to the immorality of our youth and advanced men for years more than anything I know of.[35]

Just as prostitution was an evil which had to be contained, prostitutes were themselves regarded as sites of moral infection. A witness to a hospital commission noted that "If we allowed these swell ladies from Mecklenburgh Street to flit about in pink wrappers and so on, it would be a distinct inducement to others less hardened to persevere in that life in the hope that probably they would arrive at similar distinction".[36] Not only might prostitutes be carriers of disease but prostitution itself might be contagious. Within Irish workhouses a 'classification' system was in operation, from the 1850s, which attempted to keep 'respectable' women and girls away from the 'unrespectable'. A report of the Carlow Union from 1854, noted for

example that, "although there is no separate ward in the workhouse for prostitutes, the master and matron, who are aware of the importance of the matter, do all in their power to prevent prostitutes associating with other females".[37]

Commentators on prostitution portrayed prostitutes as women whose lives were destroyed by sexual experience. Rescuers never accepted that, in a country which provided few employment opportunities for women, women could choose prostitution as a viable means of earning or supplementing an income. In his study of prostitution, Logan stated that prostitutes came usually from the lower classes: "... low dressmakers, and servants; manure collectors, who are sent very young to the streets for that purpose, have also furnished their quota".[38] Prostitutes, he noted, were not accepted into brothels unless they were well recommended, usually by another prostitute, and paid eight shillings per week to their mistresses for board, any other money they made was for their own use. He also claimed that sisters often lived together and "support[ed] their parents and relatives by the wages of prostitution".[39] The nun in charge of a Magdalen Asylum in Cork, questioned as to the causes of prostitution in the city in 1845, "... referred particularly to intemperance and love of dress, and spoke in strong terms against late dancing parties, some of which were occasionally held in the temperance rooms of the city".[40]

Organised prostitutes, those who worked in brothels were probably a little better off than their street walking counterparts. For a number of women managing their own brothel was a lucrative business. Indeed, in our efforts to examine the range of business opportunities available to women in the nineteenth century we should not overlook the brothel keeper. In Limerick, for example, in July 1836 we find eight women charged with keeping "houses of ill fame".[41] For poorer prostitutes however, conditions could be miserable. The "Bush" was a wooded place near Cobh where "... 20 to 25 to 30 women ... lived... all the year round under the furze ... like animals".[42] Many prostitutes followed soldiers around from one depot to another. The "Wrens of the Curragh" were a notorious band of prostitutes who lived primitively in makeshift huts on the perimeters of the Curragh camp. The numbers of women living in these conditions varied but up to sixty women were stated to live at the Curragh. Even living in such conditions there was a certain bond of solidarity amongst the women who occupied the "nests" and they pooled their meagre financial resources.[43] Evidence relating to the "wrens" also suggests that prostitution was a seasonal occupation. Harvesters sometimes joined the band of women during the winter, while the numbers of women at the Curragh declined during the winter when many of them returned to the city. The ranger of the Curragh, writing a report of their situation in 1860, noted that:

Were I to attempt to describe the wretched unparalleled state of misery in which the women alluded to exist, I would fail to approach its

MARIA LUDDY

character or extent. They are continually subjected to very brutal assaults, and robbery of their scanty clothing; a variety of causes prevent their following up complaints brought before magistrates as to what they suffer in those respects. [44]

The first attempts to target sexual vice in itself came from individuals who were concerned with moral reform. Rescue work became an important arena of public philanthropy amongst women in the nineteenth century. The first involvement of women in collective efforts to reform prostitutes and discourage young women from being drawn into a life of prostitution appears to have the Magdalen asylum established by Arbella Denny in 1765. She apparently became interested in this work after witnessing the abandonment of infants in the Dublin Foundling Hospital. A committee of fifteen women was chosen annually to act as visitors and in 1796 a governess or guardian paid £1 a year for the privilege of being associated with the institution.[45] It was decided that the 'penitents', as the inmates were called, should spend between 18 months and 2 years in the asylum and that they were to leave only if their future could be guaranteed in some way, either through acquiring a position or returning home. It appears that these policies remained in force in the nineteenth century. Between 1765 and 1914 at least thirty-three refuges or asylums were formed in Ireland for the rescue of 'fallen women'. [46]

In contrast to religious run Magdalen asylums, lay asylums seem to have excluded the admission of hardened prostitutes. Lay rescue workers targeted those who were redeemable, young girls who had not yet been hardened into vice. However, rescue workers soon discovered that many of their charges resisted reformation. Despite issuing annual reports none of these Magdalen asylums seem to have provoked much public discussion about prostitution. Female moral reformers enclosed their politics within the boundaries of an institution that resembled a family dwelling. When their efforts at redemption failed, or as often occurred, were rejected by the prostitutes, they took in only women whom they deemed salvageable. The case histories provided in some of the annual reports indicate that many of the women appear not to have been prostitutes at all. Many were 'seduced' women, who, on abandonment by their seducers and families, turned to the asylums for protection. It was probably easier to reclaim young and 'seduced' women than hardened prostitutes, and the greater the success rate claimed by the asylums in the reform of penitents the more justification they had for their existence and the greater their claim on public support on which the lay asylums depended.

That there was an abundance of refuges there is no doubt, and the most numerous were run by Catholic nuns. The refuges attempted three things: to keep 'fallen women' from public view, to reform the women and to prevent girls and young women from falling into vice.

PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY IRELAND

Magdalen asylums were places of confinement and the women who entered these dwellings were expected to spend at least enough time there to bring about their reformation. Life within these institutions was severely restricted and restrictive. Women were often separated into different classes. In the Dublin Female Penitentiary the classification was carried out with reference "... to their [the inmates'] former education and habits of life"[47], suggesting a social rather than moral classification. In some religious run asylums classifications were made according to the amount of time spent in the institution and the degree of penitence displayed by the inmate. Not only were 'fallen women' to be separated from the world but they were also to be separated from each other.

Once women entered these refuges, responsibility for their actions was laid firmly on the shoulders of the penitents themselves. A strict regime was followed in the asylums which stripped the women of their former identity and attempted to mould a new one for them. Penitents were forbidden to use their own names or to speak of their past. In the Magdalen asylum in Leeson street the penitents were given a number and known as Mrs One, Mrs Two. In religious run asylums they were given the names of saints.[48] The women's past had to be abandoned but even in rejecting their past the penitents were never allowed to forget that they had sinned. Their daily life was made up of prayer, labour, recreation and silence. This programme of reform and discipline made no allowance either for maternal feeling. The children of penitents were usually sent for adoption. Within all the asylums there was an exaggerated rejection of the penitent's past. "Until the penitents forget the past", as one report stated, "nothing solid can be done towards their permanent conversion".[49] All contacts with the outside world were limited and there were severe restrictions placed on the women's freedom within the institutions.

In the Sisters of Mercy Guidebook very specific instructions were laid down about how asylums were to be conducted. It was declared that:

the more secluded and quiet the asylum the better, as all means of intercourse between the penitents and their former companions must be entirely cut off; even a glance at them through a window, or the sound of their voices through a gate, wall, etc., is sometimes sufficient to shake the resolutions of those whose conversion is still incomplete; therefore great vigilance is necessary[50]

Restrictions were also placed on their physical space within these institutions. In the dormitory for example it was expected that:

A Sister's or Matron's room should be so placed as to command a view of each dormitory; and it would be well that the beds of some real penitents should be placed amongst the rest. In some asylum dormitories a lamp burns all night before the statue of the Blessed Virgin. The dormitories should be locked when the penitents have retired to them, and the key

MARIA LUDDY

be kept by the Sister. They should be prevented from having any access to them during the day. They should be required to rise and dress modestly and promptly when the signal is given.[51]

Clear directions were also laid down regarding how the penitents spent their time. The Mercy Guidebook again stated that:

The penitents should never be allowed to be idle; even on Sundays some suitable occupation should be provided, as devotions, religious instruction, learning to read &c. Labour should form part of their penance; it should be proportioned to their strength and capacity. They will generally be found disposed to idleness. On the judicious employment of their time their conversion greatly depends, but they ought not to be over-worked or harassed, least it may deject them. Laundry-work is well suited to the generality of them. Should penitents be admitted very different from the ordinary class, it would be very desirable that they could be separated from these, and employed in a suitable manner; but constant occupation is necessary for all.[52]

There was, of course, no room for vanity and the most public aspect of vanity, the women's hair, was to be cut on entrance to the asylum. This, it was believed, was:

a means of bringing grace, which the willing sacrifice of their hair – on which they usually set such value – generally brings them. ... As Magdalen began the evidence of her conversion by consecrating her hair to her Redeemer, so do they, and thus give reason to hope that they really intend to imitate her in her penance as they have done in her sins. As a check to the wild sallies of passion and temptation; under these violent impulses, some, who would not yield to better motives, have been known to defer leaving the Asylum until their hair should be sufficiently grown, in whom in the mean time grace grew and passion subsided, and they became good penitents. It is therefore, very advisable to encourage them from time to time, during their fits of fervour, to make a renewed offering of their hair to God in imitation of Magdalen. They should all be carefully prevented from oiling or greasing, or otherwise bestowing any unnecessary care on it, to which they are generally much inclined.[53]

Cutting their hair was also a test for their motivation on entering as the nuns believe that some women entered for the purpose of procuring.

Within these institutions it was expected that through discipline and work the prostitute learned self-control. Rescue workers, like the general public, believed that prostitutes were possible corrupters of female innocence who, if left unreclaimed, could corrupt others. For many rescuers, and particularly for nuns, it was not just a prostitute's temporal life that was at issue but also her eternal life. Amongst rescue workers it was generally believed that the causes of prostitution lay with the individual; if the woman could be reclaimed then the vice would be eliminated. These refuges served

PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY IRELAND

a social and moral function. They provided a place of confinement for fallen women, removing them from the streets, and from public view.

The most extensive network of Magdalen asylums, or refuges, were provided by Catholic nuns. The Good Shepherd nuns ran homes in Belfast, Cork, Limerick, New Ross and Waterford. The Sisters of Mercy ran a refuge in Galway and Tralee and an institution in Dun Laoghaire. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge operated an asylum in Drumcondra and a branch of that congregation ran a home from Gloucester street in Dublin. The Sisters of Charity also operated a home in Cork and one in Dublin. After 1830 no lay Catholic asylum was established to look after prostitutes and those begun earlier in the century were all taken over by religious congregations. The Good Shepherd asylum in Cork appears to have been the only religious run asylum established to meet the demand for a refuge resulting from the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s. It is clear that the Catholic hierarchy, and the Catholic public, felt that the only worthwhile impact to be made on fallen women could come from nuns.[54]

However, these religious run asylums failed in their attempts to reform 'fallen women'. If we examine the numbers of women who entered and left these institutions the inability of Magdalen asylums to effect their objectives is obvious. In a breakdown of the inmates of seven asylums run by religious congregations during the last century it can be seen that overall these asylums catered for a total of 10,674 women over the period 1800-1899. Of this number approximately 2,219 entered an asylum more than once. This is an underestimate as not all the registers account for repeats. The majority of women who entered these refuges did so voluntarily, approximately 7,110, or just over 66%, and a number of women re-entered, some as often as ten times.[55] From the available evidence it seems that entering a refuge was, for the majority of women, a matter of choice. While it is true that many destitute women had only the workhouse or the Magdalen asylum to turn to in times of utter distress, it would appear that the second was the favoured option of many. The length of stay in the asylums varied from one day for some women to an entire lifetime, of thirty or forty years, for others. It was generally women who entered in their teens or who were in their thirties or older, who remained in the homes. The decision to stay was made by the women themselves and although the nuns certainly did not encourage women to leave, they had little choice in the matter if the woman was determined to go. It would seem, from the number of re-entries, that some women may have used the asylums as a temporary shelter and once they were able to return to the outside world they did so. For others, the stability of life within a refuge, the order and discipline imposed may have bought a sense of security, and made it an attractive option to remain.

Referrals to Magdalen asylums often came from religious, either priests and in some cases bishops, or nuns in other convents, as well as from

hospital matrons and employers. Referrals were also made by family members, particularly parents who sent their daughters to a refuge, a practice which became more common as the century progressed. About 14% or 1,309 women were expelled from the refuges.[56] Insubordination, violence, madness or a refusal to attend to religious duties or ceremonies were the reasons usually given for dismissal. A small number of penitents were dismissed for engaging in lesbian relationships, or 'particular friendships' as it was termed, within the home. Whether this involved actual sexual activity or not remains unrecorded. It was undoubtedly difficult for the nuns to control many of the penitents and they were probably glad to see the back of many of them. Expulsion did not mean that a penitent would not be taken back into the refuge again at a later stage. Indeed the nuns did not operate on any discriminatory basis and seem to have taken in any women who came to their doors.

Prostitution was generally an occupation engaged in by women between the ages of 20 and 30 years. Many women had given up the business by the time they had reached forty. Of the women who entered, and remained, in the refuges the majority had either entered very young, at sixteen or younger, or were in their late thirties. The former group may have become institutionalised and thus remained in the refuges because of fear of the world. However, the latter group may have given up their life on the streets and purposely entered the refuges with the intention of 'retiring'. Many of the women who entered and left the refuges on a regular basis were in their twenties and thirties and were obviously using the homes as a temporary refuge from their occupation.[57]

The women who ran these refuges played out their maternal role creating homes for the penitent 'child'. They sought to inculcate in the penitent the correct attitudes and behaviour expected of women in this period. Penitents were trained in deference and subordination, the world was protected from them as possible sites of contamination, and they were shielded from the world, the source of possible temptation. The women who entered these refuges were held responsible for their actions and rescue workers stressed the importance of personal discipline to their salvation. Within these asylums the women were not expected to display any individual expression of personality or sexuality. Judging from the large numbers of women who left these refuges voluntarily, it is obvious that these standards were unacceptable to many.

The decline in prostitution noticeable in the police statistics may reflect some influence of the purity movement which was active from the 1880s. But it is more likely that rising educational standards, increased work opportunities and declining population, witnessed particularly in high levels of female emigration, were more influential. There were also a myriad of other societies which may have helped reduce the number of prostitutes operating in the country. A number of institutions were established which

took in poor girls and trained them for employment in an effort to prevent them from falling into vice.

Perhaps the most effective force in reducing the level of prostitution was the new morality which was developing strongly amongst the Catholic population. The values of the propertied came to dominate in Irish society. Those who survived the Great Famine of 1845-1851 were disproportionately farmers and other property owners, amongst whom cautious attitudes were becoming ingrained. This more calculating outlook found expression in such practices as dowry payments, impartible inheritance and a comparatively late age at marriage, and reticence in areas of sexual activity.[58] An ideology of sexual abstinence for the sake of the land eventually became the accepted basis for sexual morality of the entire society. This was a morality imposed by the family and the community, and reinforced by the teachings of the Catholic church.

Nuns played an important role in inculcating ideas of sexual virtue into the people of Ireland. Convent schools were the principal institutions where Irish Catholics were socialised by the church. Modesty and chastity were virtues taught to all Catholic girls. The church through its teachings on morality allowed young girls and women to internalise values of modesty and respectability. Along with that internalisation came shame of the body, and if shame is assumed then self discipline and self control followed automatically, at least in public. Those women who lived beyond the moral pale, the 'fallen women' of society, found refuge in the Magdalen asylums. As the century progressed and the new century dawned the families of 'uncontrollable' girls saw these Magdalen asylums operated by nuns as a possible place of concealment for their wayward daughters, to hide the shame perceived to have been visited on a family by a daughter's wayward behaviour. For example, the convent annals of St Mary's Magdalen Asylum in Cork city noted the concerns of the priest who recommended one penitent's entrance to the Asylum: it was, the Annals recorded, "... most desirable she should be withdrawn from the world's gaze on account of her sister's young family who might be injured by her example and blemished reputation".[59] The function of the Magdalen asylums was to change in the twentieth century where they became increasingly homes for unmarried mothers, rather than for prostitutes.[60] The lay population saw these refuges run by nuns as institutions of repentance, of possible 'cure', and in the twentieth century as hiding places for 'shame filled' daughters. As the nuns had acquired authority over Catholic children through education, the Catholic community gave them the authority to mould and influence their wayward daughters and to keep them, and particularly their families, in an age which was becoming increasingly concerned with the concept of 'respectability', from public shame.

Tom Inglis has argued that in the nineteenth century the Catholic church in Ireland gained a monopoly of control over the bodies of its

MARIA LUDDY

adherents.[61] Part of the control of the body arose from the control of people's living space. Homes, schools and churches became well-ordered, supervised spaces in which there was a time and a place for everything. Likewise through the control of public space prostitution was brought under control in Ireland. Limits were placed on where prostitutes might live and congregate. As the century progressed those spaces where they could congregate became more limited. Both geography and social convention kept middle-class women well away from the disreputable districts of towns and cities. Prostitutes were supervised and marginalised in their own worlds, often assigned to them by the authorities, and their activities became more circumscribed in the early twentieth century. The system that prevailed combined surveillance with toleration that was conditional.

Prostitutes however were not without some forms of resistance. They exercised their own forms of rebellion, resistance or non-conformity. They changed their names to confuse the authorities. They moved around from town to town. There was solidarity, seen particularly in the case of the "wrens" of the Curragh. There was also some resistance from the women. For example, when the women of the Curragh were apprehended for trespassing they stated that "they would go to any private corner of the Curragh which might be named; but threatened that if this was not granted they declared they would take up their abodes in the adjoining ditches, haggards and farm yards of the farmers".[62] The women, it was claimed, had threatened to involve themselves in crime if driven from the Curragh.[63] Once arrested many women did not make their court appearance. Of the forty women arrested for trespassing on the Curragh in 1859 only nine turned up in court.[64] "Many of the women", it was noted, "go to Dublin in the winter and return here in the summer or go away when there are warrants against them until it suits them to come back.[65] As we have already seen prostitutes were also able to use those institutions set up for their reformation for their own ends.

Prostitutes were and are referred to in many ways by commentators, rescue workers, etc. Amongst the descriptive names used were "women of bad character", "prostitutes", "women of abandoned character", "unfortunate women", "dirty persons", "destitute women", and the "fallen". Within the rescue homes they were termed penitents, Magdalens, and children. The range of names applied to women who worked as prostitutes relates the ambiguity, ambivalence, hypocrisy and disgust the public often felt towards these women. Ideally the public preferred not to think, and certainly not to see them at all. Confinement and reform were the ideal means of dealing with these women. Few individuals in nineteenth-century Ireland made any serious attempt to deal with the true causes of prostitution.

Notes

- [1] Quoted in Gregory Allen (1977) *The new police: London and Dublin*, *The Police Journal*, 1(4), pp. 307-308.
- [2] William Logan (1871) *The Great Social Evil: its causes, extent, results and remedies*, pp. 48-52 (London: Hodder and Stoughton).
- [3] Evidence of the Rev. Maguire, Royal Commission on the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1866-1869, H.C. 1871, (c.408-1), xix, Q. 18,770.
- [4] *Ibid.*
- [5] Logan, *Great Social Evil*, p. 95.
- [6] *Judicial and Criminal Statistics for Ireland, 1871, 1886, 1901.*
- [7] *Ibid.*, 1872.
- [8] *Ibid.*
- [9] See, Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and rescue work in nineteenth-century Ireland*, in Maria Luddy & Cliona Murphy (Eds) (1990) *Women Surviving: studies in Irish women's history in the 19th and 20th centuries*, pp. 51-84 (Dublin: Poolbeg Press).
- [10] *Annual Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, H.C. 1854-1855 (1945)*, xxiv.
- [11] Quoted in W. S. Mason (1814-1819) *A Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland*, 3 vols, iii, p. 79 (Dublin).
- [12] Isaac Weld (1832) *Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon*, p. 407 (Dublin).
- [13] Ms 1054, *Kilmainham Papers*, p. 290. National Library of Ireland, Dublin.
- [14] *Freeman's Journal*, 30 July 1855; 5 June 1857; 5 May 1880. My thanks to Dr Brian Griffin for these references.
- [15] Evidence of Mr Rawton McNamara, *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1881 (351)*, viii, Q.8472.
- [16] 10 & 11 Vic. c.89, s.28.
- [17] 17 & 18 Vic. c.103, s.72.
- [18] For the operation and resistance to the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) in England see, J. R. Walkowitz (1980) *Prostitution and Victorian Society: women, class and the state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- [19] *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*, 48 (November 1869), p. 625.
- [20] See, Maria Luddy (1992) *Women and the Contagious Diseases Acts in Ireland*, *History Ireland*, 1(1), pp. 32-34.
- [21] For the lives of Tod and Haslam see, Mary Cullen & Maria Luddy (Eds) (1995) *Women, Power and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: eight biographical studies*, pp. 161-230 (Dublin: Attic Press).
- [22] *Presbyterian General Assembly, minutes 1871.*

MARIA LUDDY

- [23] Evidence of the Rev. Maguire, Royal Commission on the Administration ... of the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1871, Q. 18,798.
- [24] T. J. Haslam (1870), A Few Words on Prostitution and the Contagious Diseases Acts (Dublin: Webb & Son).
- [25] To the Members of the Belfast Committee for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (Belfast, 1878), p. 1.
- [26] 48 & 49 Vict.
- [27] Evidence of Rev. Henry Reed, House of Commons Select Committee on CDAS, HC 1881, (351), viii., Q. 6,389.
- [28] Annual Report, Dublin White Cross Vigilance Association, 1898.
- [29] The Vigilance Record (April 1888), p. 35.
- [30] Ibid., (April 1891).
- [31] Edward J. Bristow (1977) Vice and Vigilance: purity movements in Britain since 1700, pp. 104, 163 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan). These claims are probably exaggerated. The Mecklenburg street area was a notorious red light district in the city. The police rarely interfered in the business conducted in this area and it was only with the campaign organised by Frank Duff and the Legion of Mary in 1921 that prostitution declined in this district. This area was known as 'Monto' and became even more widely known as James Joyce's 'Nighttown' in Ulysses.
- [32] Freeman's Journal, 14 September 1866. See other letters in the same paper, 7, 15, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 28, 29 September and 1, 3, 5 October 1866, all on the same subject.
- [33] Letter addressed to the military secretary, Curragh Camp, from the inhabitants, 1 September 1859, Office of Public Works, 486/59, National Archives, Dublin. My thanks to Rena Lohan for bringing this material to my attention.
- [34] MS1068, Kilmainham papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.
- [35] Evidence of the Rev. Maguire, Royal Commission on the Administration ... of the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1871, Q. 18,804.
- [36] Dublin Hospitals Commission: report of the committee of inquiry, H.C. 1887, xxxv, [c.5042], p. 94.
- [37] Annual Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, H.C. 1854-1855 (1945), xxiv.
- [38] Logan, Great Social Evil, pp. 49-50.
- [39] Ibid., p. 49.
- [40] Ibid., p. 48.
- [41] Limerick Chronicle, 9 July 1836.
- [42] Evidence of Mr Curtis, House of Commons Select Committee on CDAS, 1882, (340) ix, Q. 11,256.
- [43] See, Maria Luddy (1992, An outcast community: the "wrens" of the Curragh, Women's History Review, 1(3), pp. 341-355.

PROSTITUTION IN 19TH CENTURY IRELAND

- [44] Report of the Ranger of the Curragh, 25 November 1859, Office of Public Works, National Archives, Dublin.
- [45] For the work of Lady Denny in the Foundling Hospital see Joseph Robins, *The Lost Children: a study of charity children in Ireland, 1700-1900*, Ch. 2 (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration).
- [46] See, Maria Luddy (1995) *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Ch. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [47] Annual Report, Dublin Female Penitentiary (1814), p. 6.
- [48] The registers kept by the convent run asylums reveal this evidence.
- [49] Abstract Report and Statistical Sketch of the Magdalen Asylum, High Park, Drumcondra (1881) (Dublin), p. 17.
- [50] Guide for the Religious Called Sisters of Mercy (1866) (London), p. 58.
- [51] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- [52] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- [53] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- [54] Luddy, *Philanthropy*, p. 127.
- [55] Luddy, 'Prostitution', pp. 71-75.
- [56] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- [57] *Ibid.*
- [58] B. J. Graham & L. Proudfoot (Eds) (1993) *An Historical Geography of Ireland*, pp. 158-184 (London: Academic Press).
- [59] Ms Annals, Our Lady of Dolours, Cork.
- [60] Tom Inglis (1987) *Moral Monopoly: the Catholic church in modern Irish society* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan).
- [61] Saunter's Newsletter, 24 September 1859.
- [62] Leinster Express, 24 September 1859.
- [63] Leinster Express, 8 October 1859.
- [64] MS 1069, Kilmainham Papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.
-

MARIA LUDDY

MARIA LUDDY is a senior lecturer in history at the Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. She has published widely on the history of Irish women. Her recent works include *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918: a documentary history* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995). She is currently co-editing the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Women's Writing, Volume 4*.