MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES

“The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith”, written by Thomas Keneally, is a revisionist historical novel that tells the story of a young half-caste aboriginal and his brother. When upset by one of his employers, Jimmie lashes out in violence and kills the wife and children of the farmer.

When Jimmie first starts work on the farmer’s property, he marries a white girl called Gilda. Gilda’s story is short and she is only described as having previously been a “wayward” girl that had been forced to work practically as a slave in an institution where she had been sent. Because nothing further was said about her background, this peaked my interest and hence after some research I came across a scandal that is still an on going issue in today’s society called the Magdalene Laundries.

This report will be focused on the Magdalene Laundries that were set up in Ireland from 1922-1996. It will cover what society was like in those days, how the Irish state was involved, what long-term effects from the abuse suffered in the laundries are still affecting the survivors today and how the nuns have responded to the accusations that are held against them. Through out the report will be the points of view from all groups involved which include; the survivors of the laundries, the nuns and the Roman Catholic Church, and lastly the Irish State and the current prime minister of Ireland, Enda Kenny.

**What are the Magdalene Laundries?**

The Magdalene Laundries were initially known as the Magdalene Asylums, the first of which was set up in 1765 as a sanctuary for so called “fallen women” which is a term used to describe women that have ‘fallen from the grace of god’ by involving themselves in sexual activity. In 1829 the Catholic Church turned them into laundries which were run by the Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, Good Shepherd Sisters and the Sisters of Our Lady Charity.[[1]](#footnote-1) The last laundry, which was situated in Ireland, closed in 1996. The women that were held in these institutions were forced to work for no pay under harsh conditions and with no free will as to whether they could leave.

The Magdalene Laundries were named after the supposed prostitute in the holy bible, Mary Magdalene, who repented her sins and became a loyal follower of Jesus Christ. Originally the laundries were opened as rehabilitation centres for prostitutes who wanted to get out of the business or were taken to the asylums by force. However according to ([www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com)), by the 1870’s, the laundries had “extended beyond prostitutes to unmarried mothers, mentally retarded women and abused girls. Even young girls who were considered too promiscuous and flirtatious, or too beautiful, were sent to the asylums by their families.” Girls from the orphanages attached to the laundries would also be sent to work inside them later in life because the state did not want to pay to look after them any longer. Another way for girls to be sent in was by being victims of rape and then speaking up against their attackers. The church would remove them from society “on the assumption that by removing these women from the public eye, they would be unable to ‘corrupt’ the rest of society.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This went completely against the churches own teachings, as they believe that “those who are forced to have sex unwillingly remain virgins.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

During the 74 years that the Magdalene Laundries were fully functional in Ireland, an estimated 10,000 women were sent to work in the institutions, the youngest of which was 9 years old and the oldest was 89. According to the McAleese report, 10% of the women were sent in by their families, 9% were sent in my members high up in the church who thought the girl was heading towards sexual behaviour and “preventative measures” needed to be taken.[[4]](#footnote-4) 17% of the girls entered voluntarily after being turned away by their families, and a staggering 25% of the women were sent in by the state.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Were the laundries accepted in society at the time and why?**

For those people who knew about the Magdalene Laundries, they were considered quite normal at the time in society. In fact, many women were sent into the laundries by their own families.

Even before the Irish Independence, the Catholic Church has always had immense influence on the way Irish communities functioned and thought. They held a tight control on Irish morality and no-body dared to disagree with them for fear of being looked down upon by the rest of the community.

In those days, the schools were run by the Catholic Church and therefore they had the complete control of the shaping of people’s education. The biggest thing that the girls were taught was how sexuality was tied to sin. “Sex outside marriage was not only objectionable, but like murder, a mortal sin. And women who fell under suspicion were condemned by both the community and church as ‘fallen women’.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Because of this belief, extreme measures were taken to make girls as unattractive as possible so they would not be as desirable to men. In school there was no sexual education other than the encouragement of abstinence and on top of this, all forms of contraception were illegal in the Republic of Ireland until 1980. For this reason, when girls left school there was a great lack of basic knowledge of sexuality. Many women were easily seduced and were unaware of how they could get pregnant which led to thousands of single women falling pregnant and who then were turned away by their families who were ashamed of what the community and the church would think of them if anybody found out. The pregnant woman was then either taken to the Magdalene laundry by her family or, because she had nobody else to turn to, she would voluntarily go to the nuns without knowing what the institutions were truly like.

Sex in a Cold climate is a documentary that tells the story of 4 women who were unwillingly placed in the laundries. Christina Mulcahy tells of how her partner told her that having sex was the only true way to show your love for each other. The next time they saw each other he said; “you did it the first time, why can’t you do it again” and that was how Christina fell pregnant.

In some cases, the girl was taken away from her family without the family even knowing where she was being sent. Maureen Sullivan was sent to the Good Shepherd Magdalene Laundry in 1964. “I was 12 years of age and my father had died, my mother remarried and my home situation was abusive.” Both her family and Maureen were told that she was have a better education in New Ross than at her current primary school however when she arrived in New Ross, her school books were taken of her and she was made to work all day, every day.

"At times the nuns were known to forge ‘school reports’ and send those to the girl’s relatives, to conceal that their charges had been turned into slave labourers.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

**How was/is the Irish State involved in these affairs?**

One of the most horrifying aspects of the Magdalene Laundries case was how much the government was involved the running of this institution. As stated in the McAleese report, it was proven that over a quarter of the women in the laundries were sent there directly by the state. This means that at least 2,500 women were sent into the Magdalene laundries by a government that was ironically set up to free the people of Ireland from the rule of another. It was also said that whenever a woman actually managed to escape from the laundry (which was very difficult due to the large spikes on top of the walls and the locked gates) she would be pursued and returned by the Gardaí, who are the state police force of the Republic of Ireland.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The McAleese report also “confirms that the Irish State gave lucrative cleaning contracts to 10 Magdalene Laundries, located across the country”[[9]](#footnote-9), which means that the state was actually profiting from these institutions. These contracts included the washing and repairing of uniforms of the countries prisons, orphanages and the Irish Defence Force. On top of this, not only was the state profiting from the laundries, it was also fully aware of the conditions that the women had to work in as its “inspectors regularly visited the laundries like any other commercial laundry.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

“In 1988, an order of nuns sold part of their convent to a real-estate developer. The remains of 133 women were discovered, buried in unmarked graves on the property, and the scandal became local and national news in 1999.”[[11]](#footnote-11) 14 years later and the survivors of the Magdalene Laundries have finally received their long awaited apology. After a two-decade long campaign the Irish government has agreed to pay between 34.5 and 58 million euro compensation for the hundreds of women who were forced to work in these institutions. Under the compensation scheme, the 770 survivors that are still alive today will receive up to 100,000 euro each; depending on how long they spent in the laundry. They will also be given free medical care and counselling services to help with the long-term effects that the laundries have left them with.

Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny apologised on 19 February 2013 for the “national shame” that the Magdalene Laundries had brought them. He said he and the government “deeply regret and apologise unreservedly to all those women for the hurt that was done to them”[[12]](#footnote-12) and that they deserve the “compassion and recognition for which they have fought for so long, deservedly so deeply.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Justice Minister Alan Shatter apologised to the women saying “I hope that when you look back on today you will be able to say that the arrangements now announced constitute a sincere expression on the state’s regret for failing you in the past.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Although many of the survivors gratefully accepted the apology and compensation, others were more doubtful, and asked for an official apology from the Catholic Church as well. Maureen Sullivan is one of these people; “At last we have been heard and believed by the country, but the state and the Catholic Church allowed this to happen and they too should apologise, individually as separate orders.” So far the Catholic Church and nuns are remaining silent, and the only apology Maureen has received was an apology statement on the Religious Sisters of Charity’s website that read “we apologise unreservedly to any woman who experienced hurt while in our care. In good faith we provided refuge for women at our Magdalene Homes in Donnybrook and Peacock Lane.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

**How has the abuse that the women inside these institutions suffered, affected them later in life?**

When a woman first entered a Magdalene Laundry, her clothes were taken away and in return she was given an unflattering uniform to make her look as shapeless and unattractive as possible. Her hair was cut short (which was a horrifying thing in those days because it gave the appearance of a boyish attitude) and sometimes she was given a new name if somebody else in the institution had the same name. If the women was pregnant, once she gave birth, her baby would be forcefully taken from her and placed in an orphanage without the mother’s consent.

Along with the other women, she would have to work hard labour in complete silence where any form of friendship was discouraged. The women were not allowed to go outside unless they were to hang up laundry and were fed dripping, tea and bread while the nuns dined on roast beef and cooked chicken.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The women inside the Magdalene laundries received no pay and were told that their hard labour was in penance for their sins, even if they had not actually committed any. The labour represented “the purging of sin by the washing of dirty linen.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

On top of the hard labour that the women had to endure every day from 5 am to 7 pm, they claim to also have been both physically and sexually abused. Maureen Sullivan tells of how the nuns would often “dig you in the side with a thick cross off the rosary beads” or they would sometimes be given a thump in the side of the head if they slowed down on their way to the laundry. Another survivor remembers being regularly burned by the large industrial irons used to press sheets and how it “was normal for girls to fall ill and never be seen again.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Although it has never been proven, many survivors claim to have been sexually abused as well. According to [www.rationalwiki.org](http://www.rationalwiki.org) and “The Magdalene Sisters” movie, every so often there would be ‘mortifications’ where the women were stripped and their supposed vanity was ridiculed. Brigid Young was one of the girls who stayed in an orphanage that was connected to a Magdalene laundry. When she was still a young girl, she was sexually abused multiple times by one of the priests who came regularly to the orphanage to say mass. Even though she had little knowledge of anything to do with sex, she understood that what he was doing to her was wrong. Yet she couldn’t say anything to anyone because she knew that she would be sent to the Magdalene laundry as a “fallen” women.[[19]](#footnote-19)

All the abuse that the women inside the Magdalene laundries suffered had many harmful effects on their lives when they were finally released. Phyllis Valentine spent 8 years in a Magdalene Laundry before her release. However she still felt as if she was being judged everywhere she went. “I thought people knew who I was and what I’d done. I was supposed to be a real bad person in this Magdalene laundry and I was frightened to talk to anyone. If somebody looked at you on the street, you yourself felt that they were looking at you because you were bad.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

A lot of the women were also not able to have a healthy relationship with their partners due to the large emphasise that was put on sex being tied to sin. Phyllis Valentine was married soon after leaving the laundry however their relationship did not last because she could not bring her self to engage in any sexual activity with him. “I felt ashamed every time he would touch me, I felt like it was wrong. The nuns had taught us it was wrong to let a man touch you. They never prepared us for the outside world.”

The mothers who had their baby taken from them suffered immense grief for the rest of their lives. Some women lived in shame at having had a baby out of wedlock and others lived in fear of having another child taken off them so they just never had another child. The separation from their parents also negatively affected the child because they would often be placed in orphanages where they could be both physically and sexually abused. Some would spend years searching for their biological mother’s later in life and never find her.

Several women also spoke of the “hurt they felt due to their loss of freedom, the fact that they were not informed why they were there, the lack of information on when they would be allowed to leave, and denial of contact with the outside world, particularly family and friends.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Maureen Sullivan had rather large difficulties beginning her life again once she was free from her laundry. “I had no education, no means of applying for a job and for several years I was on the streets.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

**How have the nuns reacted to the accusations that were said against them about the Magdalene Laundries?**

Despite the fact that there are countless survivors who tell tales of the abuse and horror that took place inside the Magdalene Laundries, the church still claims that they have done nothing wrong and perhaps should even be praised for their work in the community. Claire Mc Cormack, a freelance journalist, talked to two nuns who both stated that they had nothing to do with the laundries either directly or personally.

The nuns claim that the Magdalene laundries did only good. “All orders involved, saw a need in society and tried to respond to it in the best way they could. There was a terrible need because so many women were on the street, with no social welfare and starving. We provided shelters for them.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

According to the nuns, the women were originally refugees yet when the asylums began to fill up, the nuns needed some sort of income to continue running the asylums which is why they were turned into laundries. “The money paid for their food and their keep.” Both nuns say that the compensation amount is extreme as all women that worked in the laundries were in fact working to pay for their board and food.

When asked about the abuse that a lot of survivors claimed that they had suffered the nuns responded that although the work was very hard it could not be considered abuse as the nuns worked very hard too. “Everybody worked hard. Factory work is hard today.” They also maintain that the women were not held in the institutions against their wills by force and that none of the women really wanted to leave because if they did then they would be back on the streets. “If they really wanted to escape it wouldn’t be too difficult to outrun a seventy year old nun.”

In an interview with nuns from one of the religious convents that operated a Magdalene Laundry, they talk of how the shame of the era was ‘dumped’ on the Catholic Church. They are sorry for the stigma of society at the time but cannot apologise for the Magdalene laundries doing what they considered was good. “The society those women grew up in encouraged them to be compliant and to conform and all those who ended up in the laundries went against that stereotype.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The nuns spoke of how if one of the women escaped she still wouldn’t be free from the shame of being a “fallen” women because the stigma was in society and not in the Magdalene Laundries.[[25]](#footnote-25) This is rather ironic due to the fact that the morals of society that created the stigma actually originated from the church telling the community how to think and act so that they would ensue that they would go to heaven.

The Magdalene Laundries were a place run by the Catholic Churches that took in so called “wayward” girls and forced them to work under extreme conditions for no pay. The nuns that ran these institutions considered themselves to be doing good for the women by removing them from society’s judgement and turning them into better people by making the women work off their sins. Even though the nun’s thought they were doing good, hearing the accounts of several women that have experienced living and working in the Magdalene Laundries whilst suffering physical, mental and sometimes even sexual abuse is upsetting and makes me stand on the side of the survivors who still await an apology from the Catholic Church. Researching this topic has made me realise that I am lucky to have been born in an era where woman are held in higher esteem and I am able to express my opinion without having to worry about the consequences.

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2. University students from Santa Barbara, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/article/magdalene-laundries-ireland>, (10 March, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Unknown, <http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Magdalene_laundry>, (4 April, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. University students from Santa Barbara, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/article/magdalene-laundries-ireland>, (10 March, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Claire Mc Cormack, <http://womensenews.org/story/religion/130529/nuns-claim-no-role-in-irish-laundry-scandal#.U2mGHWoriM8>, (30 May, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Steve Humphries, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtxOePGgXP>, (March, 1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Terry Firma, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/06/27/girl-slaves-of-catholic-magdalene-asylums-to-receive-compensation-but-not-from-the-church/>, (27 June, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Henry McDonald, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/05/ireland-magdalene-laundry-system-apology>, (5 February, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Claire Mc Cormack, <http://womensenews.org/story/religion/130529/nuns-claim-no-role-in-irish-laundry-scandal#.U2mGHWoriM8>, (30 May, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Maeve O’Rourke, <http://www.irishexaminer.com/analysis/apology-is-needed-221772.html>, (6 February, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Unknown, <http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Magdalene_laundry>, (4 April, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Claire Mc Cormack, <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/ireland-apologizes-magdalene-laundries>, (27 February, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Henry McDonald, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/19/ireland-apologises-slave-labour-magdalene-laundries>, (19 February, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Conor Humphries, <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2013/06/27/ireland-agrees-compensation-for-magdalene-laundries-survivors/>, (27 June, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Claire Mc Cormack, <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/ireland-apologizes-magdalene-laundries>, (27 Februaury, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Henry McDonald, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/05/ireland-magdalene-laundry-system-apology>, (5 February, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Steve Humphries, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtxOePGgXP>, (March, 1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. Steve Humphries, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtxOePGgXP>, (March, 1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Steve Humphries, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtxOePGgXP>, (March, 1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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22. Henry McDonald, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/05/ireland-magdalene-laundry-system-apology>, (5 February, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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