

The Naked Anthropologist

Laura Agustín on Migration, Trafficking and Sex

Rescue Industry history: Magdalene laundries in Ireland, sex workers enslaved

5 May 2011 in [sex work](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [8 comments](#) | [print](#)



(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Magdalene-asylum.jpg>)

I realise that many people love Mary Magdalene, but the use by any contemporary project aimed at helping prostitutes of the name *Magdalene* evokes terrible associations. I see that a project in Nashville, Tennessee, is doing just that, from an NPR story called [Relapse And Recovery: A Tale Of Two Prostitutes](http://www.npr.org/2011/04/26/135702065/relapse-and-recovery-a-tale-of-two-prostitutes) (<http://www.npr.org/2011/04/26/135702065/relapse-and-recovery-a-tale-of-two-prostitutes>). For those who have forgotten what Irish Magdalene laundries were (and the outrage that was felt when the truth came out about nuns enslaving *fallen women*), here are excerpts from an interesting story about Ireland called [Red-light Alert](http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/independent-woman/love-sex/redlight-alert-2615112.html), (<http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/independent-woman/love-sex/redlight-alert-2615112.html>) 10 April 2011, *The Independent*. Note the author calls these Rescue Industry folk *the church's lay stormtroopers* in a religious war which, in this time and place, is not about evangelical Christians but Roman Catholics.

Monto was, by all accounts, the biggest and busiest red-light district in the Europe of its era. . . In *Ulysses*, Joyce refers to the place as Nighttown. The young hero Stephen, his friend Lynch, and the middle-aged cuckold Leopold Bloom



(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Monto1.jpg>)
Bella Cohen's brothel in Monto

end up there after an evening's boozing. Stephen and Lynch go for the fairly straightforward experience. But Bloom is there for the sexual humiliation via a dominatrix at a joint run by "Bello". Bello was the real-life Bella Cohen, who actually did run an establishment that provided for the kinkier end of the trade in Monto. Around the corner in Montgomery Street was the top-end-of-the-market brothel run by Annie Mack, whose beautiful young women attracted rich clients including, it is rumoured, the then Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, who indeed was a frequent visitor to Dublin. **At its height it is said that 1,600 women worked in Monto from the lowest and cheapest houses . . . to the most expensive . . .**

. . . Its demise is well documented. That happened within

only a few years of the foundation of the State and the accession to power of the Roman Catholic church. The **church's lay stormtroopers, the Legion of Mary, did the job, led by its inquisitor-in-chief, Frank Duff.** War was declared on Monto. The new Catholic state stormed into action and **a force of gardai and legionnaires raided Monto at midnight on March 12, 1925, and literally threw the women working there out on to the street and into the Church-run slave-labour laundries.** Offended Catholic sensibilities were put right and the women were cast out.





The saddest street in Ireland was, and, to this day, remains Railway Street, off which Bella Cohen once ran her S&M joint, and where **the rear walls of the Magdalene Laundry remain, a crucifix still standing over its jail-like entrance.** That's the place for them hussies, the paedo priests must have thought to themselves. The laundry was the last of the Magdalenes to close, in 1996. **Up to the Seventies, young 'fallen' women were still being imprisoned in this hell-hole. It had official recognition from the Government as a remand prison. The girls – "penitents" – were given assumed religious names just like the nuns and enslaved, often never to see freedom.** There are places like that today in the world, in Iran. Many of the Irish girls who went into this or the other laundries never came out. Some 133 unmarked graves were found in another Magdalene in Drumcondra a few years ago.

No one would ever countenance that sort of thing here again. No one would ever think that the religious orders of nuns who ran these **concentration camps** would do anything other than spend the rest of their days repenting their crimes against humanity. No one would, surely not? Magdalene, the fallen woman rescued by Christ. Magdalene, the laundries run by nuns from four Catholic religious orders: The Sisters of Mercy, The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, The Sisters of Charity and The Good Shepherd Sisters.

Strangely, prostitution did not disappear in Ireland. **Those girls who escaped the laundry became streetwalkers** around the Grand Canal and St Stephen's Green. As is the case with streetwalkers, they were often beaten, robbed, forced to perform free for corrupt gardai and occasionally murdered.



(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/magdalene-001.jpg>)

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Pingback from [java "sexe accordéon et alcool" | Lire](#) on [5 May 2011 at 12:37](#)

Maggie McNeill on [6 May 2011 at 02:33](#)

You and I are on the same wavelength, Laura; when I read that NPR article a few days ago I thought of the Magdalen laundries as well. This just goes to show how out of touch with reality and history the prohibitionists can be. It also saddens me to see how completely NPR has bought into the whole rescue-industry thing (this is only the most recent of a number of anti-sex work features this year). 😞

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Wendy on [6 May 2011 at 06:59](#)

As I've commented before, but in case anyone missed it, two of those orders are still involved in the rescue industry through an organisation called Ruhama, which receives a significant amount of state funding and is bizarrely considered by many to be a feminist group (they talk the talk, and keep their origins quiet).

Sadly, there are also still some "penitents" in the care of the orders in one or two of the old Magdalene Laundry buildings. Very old women who have long become institutionalised.

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Laura Agustín on [6 May 2011 at 17:18](#)

maggie, i know you and i are on the same wave-length – even if we don't always write about the same topics.

npr did contact me to do a live show, though, and ask me for names of other people to talk on it, and the resulting programme is far different from what it would have been had they not done that:

<http://www.lauraagustin.com/child-trafficking-or-kids-who-leave-home-and-their-pimps-and-their-friends-in-las-vegas>
(<http://www.lauraagustin.com/child-trafficking-or-kids-who-leave-home-and-their-pimps-and-their-friends-in-las-vegas>)

wendy, i remember about ruhama, probably they will come into my sights someday!

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Lia on [24 May 2011 at 18:05](#)

I have been in touch with the Nashville Magdalene group, and while I don't like the sound of this article, I was rather impressed with their organization.

Many people who have been on the street need help to get back on their feet. And it's help that shelters can't give. If you're at the bottom, don't want to trick anymore, don't have shelter or job skills, who will help?

When I spoke with them (for a client), I found that they don't require their residents to go to church, they don't require that they participate in all their programs, and they aren't trying to get everyone to be "saved." They are much more like a half-way house with services geared towards people who have worked in the sex industry.

They do run a farm, with the intent of both paying for the programming (Have you tried to raise funds for sex workers? People are hesitant to give.) and teaching transferable job skills.

I'm as suspicious as the next person about Christian organizations (and I'm a Christian pastor!) working with individuals in sex work. But this group, from my experience, was pretty good.

Their downside was that they didn't have enough vacancies.

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Laura Agustín on [25 May 2011 at 17:52](#)

that sounds good, of course. it is just hard for people like myself who know the terrible history with the name to hear it being used now.

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Lia on [26 May 2011 at 19:15](#)

Now that I totally agree with. I hate the name Magdalene. I also hate any reference to her being a sex worker. It's fine with me if she was, but there's absolutely no evidence of it. It's not until the 5th century when Augustine of Hippo suggested that she was—that's the first reference to it.

And Augustine was an ass.

Lia

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Laura Agustín on [26 May 2011 at 19:32](#)

yes the idea that she traded sex is always being brought up – is it the red dress?

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