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Remembering lived experiences of dark pasts

Transitioning Ireland's Magdalene laundries to difficult heritage

Laura McAtackney and Olga Kwasnicka

Introduction

Institutions that specifically incarcerated girls and women – for a variety of moralistic and pragmatic reasons – were operational in Ireland until relatively recently, with the last Magdalene laundry closing in the 1990s. Their recent operation means we need to carefully consider what we know about them and how that knowledge can be communicated to a wider public as difficult heritage. Of the ten Magdalene laundries that operated in post-independence Republic of Ireland, three were still operating after 1990 (High Park, Donnybrook and Sean MacDermott Street; all in Dublin), with Sean MacDermott Street finally closing in 1996. Of the four Magdalene laundries that survived into the new state of Northern Ireland, three remained in operation until the early 1980s (Belfast, Derry and Newry), with Marianvale outside Newry finally closing in 1984. One important repercussion of this recent operation in terms of how we remember – and transmit memory as difficult heritage – is the significant number of victims and survivors who can relate their experiences firsthand. This chapter argues that, unlike official reports, we must focus on lived experience rather than formal, institutional histories as the baseline of our knowledge as we attempt to ethically remember this difficult past.

Three reports on gendered institutions – the so-called McAleese Report in 2013 and two reports on Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes in Ireland and Northern Ireland in 2021 – have prompted public and contentious debates about how and what we know about the recent past. The McAleese Report[1] was highly criticised at the time of its publication due to how it excluded and marginalised extensive oral testimonies provided by victims and survivors.[2] The 'Commission of Investigations into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters' (MBHC)[3] was a government-funded public inquiry that covered institutions in the Republic of Ireland. The much criticised report was delivered after six years in January 2021.[4] Within weeks, a much smaller scale, academic-led 'Research Report on Mother and Baby Homes and

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[1] *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* (Dublin: Department of Justice, 2013), www.gov.ie/en/collection/a69a14-report-of-the-inter-departmental-committee-to-establish-the-facts-of/?referrer=www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013

[2] Conall Ó Fátharta, 'Four years on, questions continue to be asked of report into Magdalene Laundries', *Irish Examiner*, 1 November 2017, www.irishexaminer.com/business/arid-20461988.html

[3] *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* (Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021).

[4] Ciara Breathnach, 'A dark, difficult and shameful chapter', *History Workshop*, 21 January 2021, www.historyworkshop.org.uk/mother-and-baby-homes-report/

Magdalene Laundry in Northern Ireland, 1922–1990' ('MBHML')[5] was published to a much more positive reception and has already prompted a further public inquiry in Northern Ireland, which is ongoing.[6] There were a number of differences between these two reports – including personnel, scale and legal status – but one of the factors that resulted in a more positive reception for the Northern Irish report was its substantial and meaningful inclusion of the oral testimonies of victims and survivors. The primary method of public inquires into social institutions in Ireland have been to use official archives to structure what we know about the past and, at best, testimonies to be added to provide details. This chapter will argue that we must extend our range of sources and be more critical in how we engage with them – including material culture – to enrich our understandings of these institutions and their relationship with wider society.

Extending our methods and sources to include material culture is critical for a number of reasons. Institutions existed as material worlds, with buildings and artefacts used to control and direct the experiences of those held within them.[7] As these sites now potentially transition from an operational to a heritage role, material culture will be a central part of the heritagisation

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[5] Leanne McCormick, Sean O'Connell with Livi Dee, and John Privilege, *Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922–1990: Executive Summary January 2021* (Belfast: Department of Health, 2021).

[6] BBC, 'NI Mother-and-baby homes: Reaction to statement', *BBC*, 26 January 2021, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-55816089

[7] See Eleanor Casella, *The Archaeology of Institutional Confinement* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007); April Beisaw and James Gibb (eds.), *The Archaeology of Institutional Life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009) and Laura McAtackney, *An Archaeology of the Troubles: the Dark Heritage of Long Kesh / Maze Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

process. Viewing the material culture of gendered institutions as heritage is also important in moving past legalistic determinations of evidence that have hitherto directed inquiries and their subsequent reports. Lucas Lixinski has convincingly argued that cultural heritage has an important role to play in transitional justice mechanisms, especially because of the role it plays in the creation and maintenance of national identity and communal narratives of belonging.[8] This recognition is especially noteworthy now as many former institutions have been demolished or significantly redeveloped in the years since closure. Currently, there are few remaining Magdalene laundries that can provide us with the opportunity to understand how the institutions took material form and how those materials structured, shaped and controlled the lives of those placed in them. We argue, it is important to acknowledge the role of material remains in revealing the lived experiences of gendered institutions, especially as it will play a significant role in memorialisation processes.[9]

Origins of Magdalene laundries

While Magdalene laundries were a global phenomenon that was neither exclusively Catholic nor distinctly Irish, they are distinguished on the island of Ireland by their longevity and scale of operation, especially due to the heightened collaboration between the Catholic Church and state

[8] Lucas Lixinski, 'Cultural heritage law and transitional justice: Lessons from South Africa', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 9 (2015), pp. 278–279.

[9] Laura McAtackney, 'A suitable place to remember?: derelict Magdalene laundries as possible sites of conscience in contemporary Ireland', *Space and Place*, 25, 2 (2022), pp. 266–281.

in post-independence Ireland.[10] To compare with Australia, which likewise had ten Magdalen laundries operating into the twentieth century, all but one of Australia's Magdalene laundries closed by the 1970s[11] – St Magdalen's Tempe closed in 1980[12] – but most of the Irish laundries were open until the 1980s, with a third in the Republic of Ireland closing in the 1990s. In Ireland, Magdalene laundries belonged to an interconnected network of church-run, state-funded institutions which included reformatory and industrial schools, mother and baby homes, mental asylums etc., and in which in 1951 over 1 percent of the population of the Republic of Ireland was coercively confined.[13] While institutionalisation spread across society, there was a significant gendered aspect to it, with women and girls being especially targeted due to special attention being given by Catholic moralising on what Clara Fischer has described as 'feminine transgressions'.[14]

Originally, Magdalene asylums began as philanthropic refuges, both religious and lay, established as a response to public concern with prostitution. Their goals were steeped in the morality of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rescue and reform discourses, which tended to

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[10] James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[11] James Franklin, 'Convent slave laundries? Magdalen asylums in Australia', *Journal of Australian Catholic Historical Society*, 34 (2013), pp. 70–90.

[12] Franklin, 'Abused and looked after children', pp. 70–71.

[13] Eoin O'Sullivan and Ian O'Donnell, 'Coercive confinement in the republic of Ireland: The waning of a culture of control', *Punishment and Society*, 9, 1 (2017), p. 33.

[14] Clara Fischer, 'Gender, nation and the politics of shame: Magdalen laundries and the institutionalisation of feminine transgression in modern Ireland', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41, 4 (2015).

present women as young and innocent victims whose lives had been shattered following their unfortunate 'seduction'.[15] Over the first half of the nineteenth century, the number of lay asylums declined and the running of these refuges passed largely into the hands of religious orders, who ran them on a much larger scale.[16] By 1922, there were ten Magdalene laundries across the new Irish Free State, operated by four religious orders – the Sisters of Mercy ran laundries at Dún Laoghaire and Galway, the Good Shepherds Sisters ran laundries in Limerick, Cork, Waterford and New Ross, the Sister of Charity operated laundries in Donnybrook (Dublin) and Cork and The Sisters of our Lady of Charity ran laundries at High Park and Sean MacDermott Street (both Dublin). The five Magdalene laundries in Northern Ireland were divided into four Catholic institutions run by the Good Shepherd sisters (Belfast, Newry and Derry) and one Protestant institution run by the Salvation Army (Belfast).

After 1922, clergymen played a more active role at the level of state policy and public debate in the newly independent Irish state.[17] James Smith has argued that the state and church were together forging a new national identity, one which understood moral purity largely as sexual purity.[18] Clara Fischer has indicated that this entwining of church and state specifically placed a burden on women in upholding its ideals.[19] Unmarried mothers became increasingly

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[15] Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 141.

[16] Luddy, Women and Philanthropy.

[17] Claire McLoone-Richards, 'Say nothing! How pathology within Catholicism created and sustained the institutional abuse of children in 20th Century Ireland', *Child Abuse Review*, 21 (2012), pp. 394–404.

[18] Smith, Ireland's Magdalene Laundries.

[19] Fischer, 'Gender, nation and politics of shame'.

criminalised figures,[20] and illegitimacy began to be understood as the gravest of sins.[21] These new attitudes manifested themselves in a suite of legislation restricting sexual mores and controlling women's sexuality.[22]

Institutions like Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes (the latter were established in 1922 for women who had had children outside of marriage or otherwise required state assistance) can be understood as a physical mechanism of containment for elements of society that had been identified as problematic. The regimes and humiliating treatments inside these institutions were not divorced from the prevailing societal attitudes that contributed to women and children being institutionalised. Ferguson argues that children of poor families, or abusive or neglectful parents, were seen as both 'contaminated' by the acts of their parents and in danger of becoming immoral adults themselves.[23] In particular, children of unmarried mothers were seen as shameful reminders of their mothers' sin and at risk of sexual immorality themselves. These attitudes help us understand both the Church's entitlement in taking over the 'care' of these children and the collusion and silent permission granted to it by state agents and wider society.[24] They also highlight how sexual immorality was the logic, not the reason, behind many women and girls being sent to the laundries; they were sent pre-emptively on account of a sin they were judged to have inherited or likely to commit, rather than one they had

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[20] Paul Michael Garrett, 'Creating 'common-sense' responses to the "unmarried mother" in the Irish Free State", *Éire-Ireland,* 55, 1 (2020), pp. 120–141.

[21] Steve Humphries, *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998).

[22] Garrett, 'Creating "common-sense" responses'.

[23] Harry Ferguson, 'Abused and looked after children as "moral dirt": Child abuse and institutional care in historical perspective', *Journal of Social Policy*, 36, 1 (2007), pp. 123–39.

[24] McLoone-Richards, '"Say nothing!"'.

actually committed. While some of these underlying assumptions were shared with the operation of gendered institutions in Northern Ireland, the churches did not have such a strong hold and for such a long duration in that jurisdiction (as evidenced by the Catholic Magdalene laundries closing between 1982 and 1984 and the Protestant institution closing in 1965).

It is clear from the McAleese Report into the Irish state's role in the operation of Magdalene laundries that these gendered institutions began to recede in popularity across the island by the 1960s.[25] New Ross and Dún Laoghaire were the first Magdalene laundries in the Republic of Ireland to close, both in the 1960s, with New Ross probably closing due to its low occupancy (approximately 20 women were housed in it when it closed in 1967).[26] The longevity of Magdalene laundries in the island's urban areas indicates a correlation, if not causation, between the location of laundries and concentrations of population. This may have reflected their social relationship with prospective inhabitants but also probably the economic imperatives of having a local consumer base.

Sources and methods for Magdalene laundries

There are many potential sources and methods we can utilise when delving into the recent past, and this section will present some of the potential skews and biases relating to the sources most frequently used to explore gendered institutions. Despite their clearly problematic nature, the documentary records of the Orders that ran the institutions and the state actors who facilitated and largely ignored their activities have been the focal point of government-run public inquiries.

[25] Martin McAleese, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries*, 2013, www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013

[26] McAleese, Report of the inter-departmental committee, p. 213.

While the McAleese Report was criticised by activists for the commission's lack of engagement with oral testimonies, especially those submitted to the Inquiry by groups such as Justice for Magdalenes,[27] it was the grossly unequal treatment of former occupants' testimonies in comparison to documentary evidence in the more recent MBHC Report that provoked widespread, public condemnation. The publication of this report in January 2021 was met with significant criticism in the media,[28] by former occupants,[29] legal scholars[30] and historical experts.[31] Their reactions have emphasised the need to question the archive while prioritising the lived experiences of those who were often forced occupants.

One of the obvious issues in overemphasising the importance of documentary sources is the huge power disparity between the institutions that created the records and the people who were the subjects of them. The Orders' records can provide very different accounts of how the institutions functioned, compared to the narratives of the occupants, but there are also

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[27] Conall Ó. Fátharta, 'A moral obligation', *Irish Examiner*, 19 July 2013, www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-20237286.html

[28] Elaine Loughlin, 'Mother and Baby Homes Inquiry discounted hundreds of survivors' testimonies', Irish Association of Social Workers, 2 June 2021, www.iasw.ie/MotherBabyHomes_inquirydiscounted_hundredsofsurvivors

[29] Caelainn Hogan, 'Mother and Baby Homes Report contradicts survivors' lived experiences', *The Irish Times*, 14 January 2021, www.irishtimes.com/opinion/mother-and-baby-homes-report-contradicts-survivors-lived-experiences-1.4457411

[30] Máiréad Enright, 'Responding to Ireland's mother and baby homes commission', *Oxford Human Rights Hub, 20* January 2021, https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/responding-to-irelands-mother-and-baby-homes-commission-report/

[31] Breathnach, 'A dark, difficult and shameful chapter'.

interpretative issues due to differential access and the critical gaze of the researcher.[32] Even after numerous commissions of investigation into institutional abuses, religious archives remain largely sealed, with access provided to only some selected researchers.[33] When compelled to provide access to archives for public inquiries, the inquiries have generally returned the records to the religious orders without making them accessible to anyone else, to the consternation of professional archivists.[34] Advocates argue that the state has also obstructed survivor's access to the archives created during their report-making processes and non-sensitive information like administrative files.[35] In effect, there is a need to question not only the official archives as they are presented, but also the lack of transparency regarding their contents and ongoing inaccessibility to present day.

The collecting and using of oral sources are a necessity not simply because of the many problems with relying on official archives, but also due to the significant number of victims and survivors who want their experiences on record. Collecting oral histories has become

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[32] Compare Jacinta Prunty, *The Monasteries, Magdalen Asylums and Reformatory Schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1853–1973* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017) with Smith, Ireland's Magdalen Laundries.

[33] For example, extensive access to the archives of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland was provided to Jacinta Prunty for her book *The Monasteries* than for any other historical researcher.

[34] Catriona Crowe, 'The Commission and the Survivors', *The Dublin Review*, Summer 2021, https://thedublinreview.com/article/the-commission-and-the-survivors/

[35] Maeve O'Rourke, 'Dr Maeve O'Rourke: Here's a full analysis of the problems with the government's Mother and Baby Homes Bill", *thejournal.ie,* 21 October 2020, www.thejournal.ie/readme/maeve-orourke-analysis-mother-and-baby-homes-5240049-Oct2020/ [accessed Apr. 2022].

increasingly mainstream since the start of the second half of the twentieth century, with oral historians claiming a privileged access to truths excluded from traditional historical records as they pursue those 'hidden from history'.[36] As this source has gained popularity, direct experience of historical events was assumed to be the guarantor of truth. But critics had long questioned the accuracy of memory as a factual, historical source and so it was oral historians such as Portelli[37] and Frisch,[38] who instead placed the issue of subjectivity as a primary asset. Many oral historians have argued that it is not just the content of oral histories that matters (as it does when one treats testimonies as factual statements or evidence), but also that they can reveal nuances of experience. Increasingly, it has been the case that memory is not understood as an imperfect means of accessing the truth, but as an action in the present. In recognising the social dimension of memory, we acknowledge an individual's narrative as reflecting the cultural and social processes they were, and are, part of.[39]

Of course, oral testimonies also have biases, as does any source, especially when working with the vagaries of memory of vulnerable, traumatised and potentially memory-deficient elderly

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[36] Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *The Politics of Memory: Contested Pasts* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2005); Hodgkin and Radstone, *The Politics of Memory*, p. 11.

[37] Alessandro Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop Journal*, 12, 1 (1981), pp. 96–107.

[38] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

[39] Ian McBride, *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

people, who are often discussing experiences many decades after they happened.[40] Likewise, conducting oral histories can skew due to focus and what becomes part of the record due to the aims and objectives of those conducting the recordings. These skews and distortions can be intentional, including to focus on otherwise under-explored areas, but the form of oral work can greatly shape the outcome. Of the projects that have recently taken place in Ireland, they are explicit in aiming to honour the survivors as much as retrieve information about the past.[41] This is an important originating factor, because by forefronting the memories of former occupants of the institutions we acknowledge the 'rights of narration' of those most impacted by them.[42] This means oral testimonies are not simply viewed as means of fact extracting – or conduits to retrieving the past – but they acknowledge where we should focus on uncovering experiences of institutional abuse – in the memories of victims and survivors.

Moving beyond these two traditional sources, this chapter will explore an often-overlooked source – material remains. While it is not posited that material culture should replace more traditional sources – and it cannot bridge all gaps or arbitrate on all the contradictions between archival and oral sources – it does provide another type of information that can add to our understandings of how institutions functioned and were experienced. Material culture is not a completely neutral or objective source – objects have biographies, materials can be retained or destroyed for many reasons and they can also be manipulated to highlight particular facets of the

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[40] Laura McAtackney, 'Transitional sites and 'material memory': Impermanence and Ireland's derelict Magdalene laundries", in Haidy Geismar, Ton Otto, and Cameron David Warner (eds.), *Impermanence: Exploring Continuous Change Across Cultures* (London: UCL Press, 2022).

[41] 'Our Activities', The Waterford memories project, www.waterfordmemories.com/home [accessed 18 Feb. 2022].

[42] Homi Bhabha, 'Democracy de-realized', *Diogenes*, 50, 1 (2003), pp. 27–35.

past – but materials are useful because they have a physical integrity that cannot be completely skewed or distorted. In terms of how we communicate its associated stories, material culture can be crucial in making a connection point between the experiences in the past and the difficult heritage consumer in the present. It is especially important to consider how material culture might be used in tandem with oral histories, as a source either to connect to particular narratives or to provide poignant layers of information that the public may find especially compelling and meaningful in heritage settings.

In the case of Magdalene laundries in Ireland, there are a number of extant although incomplete material structures – most notably Donnybrook and Sean MacDermott Street Magdalene Laundry sites in Dublin[43] – and there is a wide range of moveable material culture that resides within those structures, although often decontextualised, or have been moved beyond them. By virtue of their recent operation, we have an opportunity to bring together a wide array of material culture with victims and survivors who can narrate the meanings and understandings of particular materialised places and objects in ways that elaborate both the mundanity of the structural violence of such places and the individualised nature of their experiences. The bringing together of such sources can allow us to retrieve more nuanced understandings of institutional life because by their very nature no two experiences are the same. The insights they can bring are especially important in the heritagisation process as they will assist in connecting people, place and thing that can engender empathy for otherwise disconnected members of the public.[44]

Not all material culture is the same and has the same potential to provide interesting or important insights into the past. But material culture can play a significant role in adding to our

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[43] McAtackney, Transitional Sites and Material Memory.

[44] Geerte M. Savenije and Pieter de Bruijn, 'Historical empathy in a museum: Uniting contextualization and emotional engagement', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, 9 (2017), pp. 832–845.

investigations that are not only determined by the exceptional nature of the form. It is often the most mundane objects that have the most potential to emphasise the real differences between impoverished lives in wider society and the abusive lived experience of historic institutions in the recent past. Following Daniel Miller, it is the very ordinariness of material culture that often hides the power it has in shaping our lives.[45] It is only on closer inspection that these material-inspired memories, especially if occurring at institutional sites, can play a significant role in interpreting difficult pasts. Such material worlds have great heritage value in not only retrieving past memories but communicating the many facets of institutionalised pasts to the general public. In the next section, material culture will be explored in various ways, including as vectors for site-responsive oral histories and their potential in transitioning former local institutions to internationally recognised sites of conscience.

Material culture

The artefacts, structures and materialised landscapes of Magdalene laundries are often overlooked in our focus on their operation but they should be interrogated and interpreted precisely because otherwise 'we fail to notice what it does'.[46] Institutions did not solely exist as philosophical ideas, they were monumental material structures that were designed to separate, control, survey and facilitate punishment of those held inside them. Recognising their physical and material roles in shaping and directing survivors' and victims' experiences opens up the potential to not only locate other forms of knowledge about the past, but also ensure the past is not intentionally downplayed or conveniently forgotten. It is much easier to minimise and distort the lived experiences of historic institutions if we no longer retain material evidence to explore, walk through and highlight into the future.

[45] Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (London: Polity, 2010).

[46] Miller, *Stuff,* p. 155.

In the Republic of Ireland, only three of the ten post-independence Magdalene laundries remain, to some degree, intact. In Northern Ireland, there are even less significant remains as the institutions closed at least a decade earlier. Furthermore, as recently as December 2021, the largely intact institutional landscape of the Good Shepherd sisters at Marianvale, Newry, was demolished without public scrutiny or consideration for heritage listing.[47] Most of the Magdalene laundries that functioned until the late twentieth century in Ireland have been demolished or significantly altered since closure and the remaining structures are partial, incomplete and/or materially under threat. For example, the buildings of the former Sunday's Well Magdalene laundry in Cork have been irreparably damaged through long-term dereliction and multiple incidents of arson to the extent that the standing buildings are no longer structurally sound and access is not permitted by their current owners (property developers). As Sunday's Well is privately owned and the entire site has been moving through the planning process, its future looks likely to be large-scale demolition and conversion of the site to private housing.[48] The two former Magdalene laundries that remain in Dublin – on Sean MacDermott Street and in Donnybrook – are the most intact Magdalene laundries across the island of Ireland and we should consider how their very different remains provide materialised insights into lived experience as difficult heritage.

Both Sean MacDermott Street and Donnybrook have been accessed by one of the authors, Laura McAtackney, with a range of colleagues to conduct different forms of archaeological investigations of their material worlds. Both sites have been explored, and a

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[47] 'Newry Man Lost in Ireland', video posted to Facebook, 21 December 2021, www.facebook.com/watch/?v=614390549875316

[48] Tommy Barker, 'Cork city's Good Shepherd Convent back up for sale with planning for 202 units', *Irish Examiner,* 1 May 2019, www.irishexaminer.com/property/arid-30921322.html

variety of detailed reports on the material world of Donnybook have been created for their owners as part of the development process. While less work has been completed at Sean MacDermott Street, both sites have been accessed and they provide important opportunities to reveal lived experiences while having commonalities and differences from each other.[49] The differences between the sites are as much directed by the subsequently altered nature of their material worlds as any pre-existing differences in their location, ownership and operation. The former Donnybrook Magdalene laundry has been situated in what has long been a prosperous and middle-class area of Dublin since the late nineteenth century. But despite its gentile surroundings the immediate vicinity of the laundry indicates it had a more marginalised existence as part of a large religious complex (still run by the Sisters of Charity) abutted by workers housing and opposite a Gardai station. The former laundry was only accessible due to it being separated from its domestic and religious context when the industrial part of the site was sold as a going concern in 1992. The rest of the religious landscape (including women's dormitories) was demolished or derelicted with the religious buildings retained within the still-adjacent Sisters of Charity convent complex. Some of the abandoned structures remain within the convent complex that abut the laneway but their interiors are not accessible.

The industrial structures at Donnybrook are still standing and retain an extensive, if partial, material world, some of which can be explicitly tied to the Magdalene laundry phase of operation and others that have been added to since 1992. The material world includes large-scale industrial machinery, sorting tables and other laundry infrastructure through to religious objects – including statues, crosses and other ephemera – and administrative items and equipment. The post-1992 material introductions to the site include a small number of machines, laundry ephemera (including plastic bags, laundered whites and detergent bottles) and a range of office equipment and accounting papers that can be dated up to the days before the site closed for the final time in the 2010s. There is a significant material assemblage that cannot be definitively

[49] McAtackney, A suitable place to remember?

dated, which could have been introduced to the site either before 1992 or after. But it is clear that the material world of the former Magdalene laundry was not discarded on the transfer of ownership and it largely continued to structure the workings of this site until its final closure.

[Insert 15032-6893-003-Figure-001 here]

A decaying interior of a building with flaking white paintwork, non-functional appliances and a skylight.

Figure 3.1 The interior of one of the laundry rooms, Donnybrook Magdalene Laundry, 2018.

Source: Laura McAtackney's own

Donnybrook Laundry has now been inactive and increasingly derelict for a decade and, similar to Sunday's Well in Cork, it has passed from laundry owner to property developers who aim to change the site from an industrial to residential property (Figure 3.1). This change of ownership creates an ambivalent relationship for the archaeologist as access to the site has been only forthcoming due to the requirements of the planning process. This meant that excavation, scanning and recording exercises – both of materials and site-responsive oral testimonies – were facilitated and conducted alongside graffiti recording and other forms of building recording as per recommendation of a number of different archaeologists to allow the site to be, eventually, redeveloped. As the site currently stands, it is in a long-term derelict, semi-ruinous state, but still maintains its coherence as the material world of a religious–industrial institution. The material world can allow us to retrieve various insights about the site – how the rooms of the industrial laundry were connected and added to over time, how the machines were laid out, how the women would have moved around those spaces, how they were kept separate while working together – that are not as apparent in other forms of evidence.

One creative response to the site of Donnybrook was to conduct a small number of site-responsive oral histories in 2018. The aim of such recordings was to allow former occupants to be part of the archaeological recording process while also moving oral work away from

predetermined outcomes.[50] Such a format allowed the former occupants' memories to be solely directed by their engagement with place as a materialised experience. Being physically immersed in the buildings and landscapes of the former Magdalene laundries allowed for a more reactive and less practiced or self-conscious response to reflecting on lived experience. They resulted in insights that we could not have predicted – including locating domestic furniture that had been left in the industrial complex – and they also revealed the ongoing traumas of victims and survivors in how they reacted to the site. But there are ethical issues in using such an immersive process as it can prompt unexpected and unwanted traumatised responses in victims and survivors. To minimize the experience being too traumatic, we ensured the former occupants were as prepared for reintroduction to the site as possible and they had a desire to return to the site. In this case, each participant was familiarised with pictures of the site before reintroduction to avoid shock at its appearance and to allow them to be in control of the process. They were also informed they were not expected to talk about any experience they were not familiar with nor did they have to continue if they were uncomfortable or unduly distressed at being at the site. In practice, while the women were fully versed on what to expect on entering Donnybrook, they still had strong reactions that were undoubtedly difficult for them. On the day, key to moving through the process was ensuring the women felt completely in control, especially reiterating they were under no pressure to talk about anything they did not wish to discuss and they could react – or avoid – to any part of the structure as they wished. Most importantly, it was reiterated they could stop the process at any time. In hindsight, one important outcome of these oral testimonies was not only to provide insights into how the site functioned – as revealing the everyday mundane cruelty of the regime as well as extraordinary aspects of their lived experiences – but also to record the enduring trauma of institutionalisation on former occupants, even as it occurred many decades after their incarceration.

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[50] McAtackney, A Suitable Place to Remember.

In contrast, Sean MacDermott Street occupies a large site in inner-city Dublin and was the last Magdalene laundry in Ireland to close, but it did not transition onto another usage and has lain largely unused (excepting some of the convent and church buildings) since that time. It has no extant industrial laundry facilities due to a fire in 2006 that resulted in the industrial complex being demolished.[51] The structures now exist as a collection of largely derelict convent, chapel and domestic dormitory buildings – in varying degrees of good and poor repair - but increasingly inaccessible due to ongoing dereliction and ruination. On inspection the interiors reveal that while some material culture remains, it is not in situ. There are large collections of moveable material culture – domestic items, such as settees, tables, chairs – resituated and collected together in various locations around the site. This includes a large collection of vernacular furniture stored in the former formal living room of the convent, which is located opposite the internal entrance to the church. There have been a number of material introductions to the site, which relate to its post-operational use for site-responsive and experimental theatre since its closure.[52] This includes the addition of prams, cots, cushions and the repainting of walls (including hallways painted in a deep red) that have deeply altered the site in compelling but often misleading ways.

Sean MacDermott Street is the only former Magdalene laundry that remains in public hands since its transfer to Dublin City Council in the 1990s. In mid-2022 it was officially earmarked to be converted into a 'site of national conscience'.[53] It is crucially important that we understand the material nature of these remaining sites – and the potential and limitations that

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[51] Atlas of Lost Rooms, http://atlasoflostrooms.com/laundry/ [accessed Jun. 2023].

[52] Including ANU's production of 'Laundry' in 2011, https://anuproductions.ie/work/laundry/

[53] Paul Hosford, 'Dublin's last Magdalene laundry to be turned into "site of national conscience"', *Irish Examiner*, 4 July 2022, www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40910705.html [accessed 15 Sep. 2022].

they maintain, when considering how they can most meaningfully communicate lived experience as a form of difficult heritage. Hitherto, the record-keeping of nuns has primarily been used to retrieve factual details proving occupants' existence, to validate their claims for compensation, and retrieve any evidence of maltreatment, abuse and forced incarceration. In similar ways, the existing oral records of victims and survivors have focused on locating evidence of explicit abuse – primarily physical, sexual and emotional abuse – and acts of resistance by the occupants to be used in official commissions. These established foci of evidence have naturally skewed to address predetermined points of interest for official inquiries and as such are not completely free to explore more tangential interests and more ambiguous experiences.

In contrast, detailed investigations of the material world can tell us more about the everyday mundanity of lived experience within the structural violence of religious–industrial complexes. Explicitly engaging with the material world of derelict Magdalene laundries – incomplete and ruinous as they may be – is vitally important. We must be aware of how the material remains of each site might skew what narratives can be extracted for heritage purposes, if they are not carefully considered and possibly intermingled to pull out different types of narratives. Indeed, due to the National Museum of Ireland acquiring significant collections from Donnybrook, it is possible what remains in Sean MacDermott Street will be augmented by artefactual material culture from the other site. How those different types of material remains may be used to reveal the lived experience of these institution will be determined by those who are involved in the heritagization processes connected to Sean MacDermott street, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Currently, the remains of the convent, women's quarters and church at Sean MacDermott Street indicate very different forms of architecture coexisting at the site, with the grandeur of the Italianate nineteenth-century church acting as a shocking comparative to the bare and cramped women's quarters parallel to it (the latter are currently in the worst state of repair of any standing

structure on the site).[54] The extant buildings and material culture are especially important because, in contrast to Donnybrook, they provide some insights into how victims and survivors would have lived on these sites due to the extant living quarters. But it is important to also consider what is no longer there. There must be attempts to 'presence absence' (Buchli and Lucas 2001) – of illuminating what has been lost, removed or destroyed – at such sites. The case of the then demolished industrial laundry at Sean MacDermott Street is an interesting example of the potential to engage with the traces, ephemera and immateriality of the site in how it might be transitioned to a site of difficult heritage (Figure 3.2). Despite the laundry complex being demolished after the fire in 2006, the footprint of the laundry is still at least partially retrievable today. Part of the external perimeter wall still retains fans and barred windows that would have facilitated hot air – but not forced occupants – to escape the ground floor. Looking down, the ground includes evidence of the bases of machines that would have been bolted to the floor, tiling from toilet facilities and long-ridged drying areas, all contributing to creating a remarkably retrievable ground floor plan.

[Insert 15032-6893-003-Figure-002 here]

A room with a sink, patterned drawn curtains, a rusting radiator, yellow-painted walls and no other furniture.

Figure 3.2 The interior of a woman's room in the dormitories, Sean MacDermott Street Magdalene Laundry, 2020.

Source: Laura McAtackney's own

[54] National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, 'Entry for Monastery of Our Lady of Charity, Sean MacDermott Street, Dublin 1, Dublin City', www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/50060466/monastery-of-our-lady-of-charity-sean-macdermott-street-dublin-1-dublin-city

Memorialisation

Finally, this chapter will turn to the issue of memorialisation and specifically how we might convert these different understandings of the Magdalene laundries into a memorial as a form of state-mandated difficult heritage. Many of the survivors and victims from Ireland's institutions have been vocal in demanding not only that they are not forgotten but to do all we can to ensure their experiences are not repeated. The emphasis on memorialisation as an expected outcome of the process of truth-recovery was particularly notable from the published report of the Dublin Honours Magdalenes (DHM) event, which was organised by JFMR and Norah Casey in June 2018. While DHM was conceived as a multi-day event that would publicly celebrate the women while pushing for fuller redress, it also provided an opportunity to record how the participants wished to move forward at that point in time. As part of the event a two-hour listening exercise placed participants in groups with facilitators to answer three specific questions:

1. What should we all know about the Magdalene laundries?
2. What lessons should we learn from what happened in the Magdalene laundries?
3. How – in what ways – should we remember what happened in the Magdalene laundries?

The report from this exercise was published in 2020 and provides detailed insights into individual and collective responses to those questions. It unequivocally indicated there was a general wish to remember: 'Above all, the women insist that what happened to them should never be forgotten'.[55] But moving through the transcripts and the report in full, what 'never be forgotten' means in practice differed quite considerably from different respondents. The report emphasised the desire by many victims and survivors for a true history of Magdalen institutions

[55] O'Donnell, Dublin Honours Magdalenes, p. 33.

to be introduced into education regimes and especially be included in the Irish school curriculum,[56] but there were differing perspectives on other forms of memory work.

An important background to these discussions was Justice Quirke's recommendation in the Magdalene's Restorative Justice scheme that 'the State should establish, fund, staff and accommodate a small Dedicated Unit which should be charged to provide', including 'The acquisition, maintenance and administration of any garden, museum or other form of memorial'.[57] The DHM report mentioned the remaining, derelict sites, especially Sean MacDermott Street, but there was not a strong sense in 2018 as to how the site should be used or how it might communicate their lived experiences. Suggestions ranged from 'a museum anyone can go into'[58] to erasing the site completely – 'burn it down'.[59] Divergencies of survivors' responses are to be expected, but it is evident that the memory of lived experiences has become increasingly important as time moves forward and fewer victims and survivors remain.

While the Quirke report specified a memorial statue as appropriate (in 2013) there was concern in the DHM report that a garden or statue to the Magdalenes would be too static, uncritical and easy to overlook. Rather, there has been an emerging emphasis on memorialisation that is spatially significant, active and critical of past actions while being future-focused. Such a combination of remembering the past while emphasising the need for ongoing social injustice to be addressed follows recent trends in heritage that focus on social change in the present as an

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[56] O'Donnell, Dublin Honours Magdalenes, pp. 33–37.

[57] John Quirke, *The Magdalene Restorative Justice Ex-Gratia Scheme* (Dept of Justice and Equality, 2013), www.justice.ie/en/JELR/THE%20Quirke%20report.pdf/Files/THE%20Quirke%20report.pdf, pp. 11–12.

[58] O'Donnell, Dublin Honours Magdalenes, p. 45.

[59] O'Donnell, Dublin Honours Magdalenes, p. 44.

imperative.[60] Since 2018, inspiration has been taken from existing sites of conscience, which enlist history in the service of social justice by subscribing to a never again mission,[61] in connecting events in the past, with redress in the present and future-making change.[62] We believe it is important, in terms of centring lived experience through heritagisation processes, that memorialisation engages with the material structures and former occupants' experiences rather than abstract representations.

Such an approach to 'memorialisation' would be an innovation from what Quirke mandated in 2013, but it is a suitable response to the scale of gendered institutional abuse that Ireland is still processing – including post- McAleese reports – as we are over a decade from the original report. In this interluding decade, we must include issues that have surfaced since 2013, especially the enduring sidelining of testimonies of victims and survivors and overemphasising of the historical records of the Orders in the recent MBHC report.[63] There is now an even greater appetite for memory to centre victims and survivors in critical spaces in which the past is

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[60] Adel Chynoweth, Bernedette Lunch, Klaus Petersen, and Sarah Smed, *Museums and Social Change: Challenging the Unhelpful Museum* (London: Routledge, 2020).

[61] A Nelson and S Pharaon. 'Introduction: Reframing the historical narrative at sites of conscience', *Forum Journal: Preserving Difficult Histories*, 31, 3 (2017), pp. 3–8.

[62] Linda Steele and Justine Lloyd, 'Place, memory and justice: Critical perspectives on sites of conscience', *Space and Culture* (in press, 2022).

[63] Yvonne Murphy, William Duncan, Mary E. Daly, 'Report of the Commissions of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matter' (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/#executive-summary

not only remembered but also questioned and, if need be, reformulated. One approach, originally championed by the Open Heart City initiative, and now part of government policy, is to view the material remains of Sean MacDermott Street as the most suitable place to remember legacies of institutional abuse in Ireland.[64] The site is centrally located, as noted, has significant material remains and is large enough to include new elements to address future-making imperatives, including the creation of an associated archive. Activists have argued that key to its rearticulation as a potential site of conscience is the inclusion of an Independent National Archive for Historical Institutional and Care-related Records to be located on the same site.[65]

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to highlight (1) the need to question what official archives and reports can tell us about lived experiences of historic institutions; (2) the need to forefront but be conscious of how we use the memories of victims and survivors in how we remember; and (3) to include other sources of information, especially the surviving material remains of such sites. We are at a time when we should be more broadly considering how we can transition former institutions to difficult heritage. To do so, we must focus on material sites as authentic spaces of lived experience and not allow for them to be demolished or irreparably damaged while we falter with indecision as to the form of difficult heritage. Not only are the former sites spatially and materially connected to the pasts we aim to remember, but they can also be reconfigured to remember the past while addressing enduring social injustices in the present as active sites of conscience.

[64] Open Heart City: Sean MacDermott Street, http://openheartcitydublin.ie/

[65] Open Heart City, “Interim Vision Document” http://openheartcitydublin.ie/interim-vision-document/ (2021)

While the focus of legal inquiries has been on official archival records and, to a lesser extent, the oral testimonies of victims and survivors, this chapter argues that material culture has an important role to play in not only retrieving new narratives but in combining with oral sources to allow the mundane nature of institutional structural violence to be uncovered and communicated to a wider public. The combining of sources that focus on extant material sites is especially significant as one of the last unmet recommendations of the Quirke Report is the creation of a memorial. This chapter argues that the form of memorial must take into account the changing contemporary context and (lack of) lessons learnt. It should be ambitious in its aims. Such a starting point allows for difficult heritage to act as a form of transitional justice[66] that explicitly addresses the need for ongoing social change[67] in contemporary Ireland.

[66] Lixinski, 'Cultural heritage law'.

[67] Chynoweth, Museums and Social Change.