

Jacinta Prunty, *The Monasteries, Magdalen Asylums and Reformatory Schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1853–1973*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2018, pp xiv + 616, €35.00, ISBN: 978-1-78218-322-8

Academic publishing is riven with arguments about the optimum size for a scholarly publication; the cost of producing a volume that exceeds three-hundred pages needs to be balanced against the saleability of the book. Scholars therefore often find themselves fighting a hopeless battle when they ask a publisher to take on a manuscript as large as *The Monasteries, Magdalen Asylums and Reformatory Schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland, 1853–1973*. Columba Press rose to the challenge, producing a tome that is over six-hundred pages in length, and managing to sell it at a most reasonable price. The reality is that a book of such physical size does not handle well, nor is it easy to navigate, so the question remains: has Prunty justified her decision to produce a lengthy volume with, as she writes in the Introduction, ‘an ambitious chronology of 1853 to 1973’ (p. 20)? Prunty includes in her study, the ‘monasteries, magdalen asylums and reformatories’ of the sisters of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland (OLC), but recognises that any one of these operations could have merited its own volume. She equally recognises that separate volumes could have been produced, to cover the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and she notes that her decision to include monastery and convent history alongside the history of care facilities adds to the complexity and length of the book. In her defence of the design of the volume, Prunty argues that her decision about this approach rested on the ‘interconnectedness’ of the primary sources, and the ‘complex intertwining of the temporal and spiritual lives’ (p.20) of the convents, refuges, residential schools, homes and hostels. I am not entirely convinced of the wisdom of her decision; the advantages of providing a long and impressively-detailed narrative account are sometimes outweighed by the a loss of focus and argument.

There is, however, a compelling and subtly-argued point that drives the early chapters, and exposes many flaws in the popular understanding of so-called ‘magdalen laundries’, industrial schools, and reformatories. The point is, quite simply, that current debate is impoverished by many misconceptions about magdalen refuges for women. Drawing on an extensive range of sources, and providing much evidence, Prunty shows how these institutions were founded out of ‘a genuine sympathy for the plight of women forced into prostitution and an active concern for their eternal salvation’ (p. 97). The asylum movement, however, did not tackle larger questions, including the ‘double moral standard that applied to men and women . . . the sexual licence that was allowed to members of the army and navy . . . [and] the social structure that left poor young women . . . perilously exposed’ (p. 97). When the OLC established magdalen asylums, these were

not ‘accessory works’, rather they were the central work of the institute. At no time did they run ‘magdalen laundries’ and no women ever lived in laundries, which were quite separate from residential quarters. Indeed, the term ‘magdalen laundries’ was not in use. Laundries attached to refuges were simply the means of generating an income ‘adopted by practically all nineteenth-century charitable enterprises in Ireland trying to help women and girls’ (p. 51), at a time when washing was the principal means of livelihood for thousands of women in Irish towns and cities. Prunty also reminds readers of the positive connotations attached to the term ‘asylum’ in nineteenth century Ireland, when it was understood to indicate a place of safety and humane treatment, in contrast to the prisons, workhouses and private ‘madhouses’.

The book provides a clear and very well-referenced account of how the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity arrived in Ireland from France, to take charge of an asylum in Drumcondra Road, in 1853. At that time, there were several magdalen asylums in Dublin, under Protestant and Catholic management. All of these asylums were maintained largely by the work of the residents, and the employment of the women in laundry work and needle work was an economic necessity. Supporters of such refuges had to guard against accusations of keeping prostitutes in comfort and luxury, and had to assure their supporters that the ‘inmates’ wanted to turn their lives around. The women were free to come and go as they pleased, and some were given assistance to emigrate so that they could have a new start in life. The model of care that was evident in nineteenth century magdalen asylums was not one in which mid-nineteenth century Dubliners had difficulty.

How the OLCs adapted and changed their refuge projects across the late nineteenth-century and twentieth century are also the concerns of this book. Prunty’s examination of the juvenile reform movement is thorough, as is her study of the industrial school system. These are areas that merit further study elsewhere, drawing on evidence from other archival collections. Because the book also includes an extensive account of developments in OLC juvenile care in the twentieth century, it becomes enmeshed in discussions of ‘modern methods’ adopted, and in changes in policies around child and adolescent care. The unfettered access that Prunty had to twentieth-century OLC records has allowed her to write a detailed narrative description of the work of the sisters, and of outcomes for girls and women who had lived in care, but a weakness in the later part of the book is the over-reliance on internal records, and an absence of critical appraisal of these sources. Such an appraisal might have helped to balance the prevailing popular narrative about magdalen asylums, and the laundries attached to these refuges. The laundries are now associated, in the public sphere, with incarceration and cruelty; Prunty suggests that they need to be understood within a historical framework, and the first half of this book

achieves this very well. To attempt to continue the history of the asylums and laundries into the mid-twentieth century, and to grapple with the changes in which the sisters operated, was ambitious. At the end of the book, the reader is somewhat frustrated by a lack of analysis, and the failure by the author to position this history within the history of women religious, social history, Catholic Church history, and the history of education. While historians, and indeed the general reader, will welcome this excellent and exhaustive study, it could well have been produced in two volumes, both of which could have had a tighter critical analysis, and a greater engagement with other scholarship.

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Stephen J. McKinney and Raymond McCluskey, eds., *A History of Catholic Education and Schooling in Scotland: New Perspectives*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. x + 207, €89.99, eBook, ISBN 978-1-137-51370-0

This innovative new volume edited by Stephen J. McKinney and Raymond McCluskey brings together a collection of essays on Catholic school education in Scotland, focusing on its historical development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is published on the occasion of the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act, 1918, but it fills a gap in scholarship that reaches beyond it. The book's declared aims are fairly ambitious: it seeks to 'provide a series of scholarly responses to the historical context of the act' (p. 1), 'open up new lines of enquiry' (p. 2), and 'deepen our historical knowledge and understanding of some of the key people and events that supported the growth and development of Catholic school education' (p. 3). This volume not only delivers but excels, providing a much-needed collection of essays that reflect the variety of research recently conducted into the history of Scottish Catholic schooling.

The authors are currently working in the fields of history, education studies and archival science, predominantly but not exclusively at universities. Based in Canada, Australia, and France as well as the United Kingdom and drawing from expertise from highly capable individuals in different stages of their careers, the knowledge carefully gathered for this volume through its contributors is impressive, but also effectively highlights the cross-disciplinary nature of the historical study of education. Creating a coherent volume out of such a diverse set of contributions can be a challenge. Notwithstanding, the editors have done a masterful job incorporating the varied case studies in a meaningful way. Collectively, the book identifies five key themes or significant fields: poverty, the role of female teachers, the training of Catholic