



Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History A project funded by the



This Oral History was collected by Evelyn Glynn while researching for her MA at Limerick School of Art and Design and is also available to download from the *Breaking the Rule of Silence* website at:

<http://www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com>

Full consent has been obtained from the interviewee for its inclusion in this archive.

Reference Code:	MAGOHP/57
Oral History of:	Anne Culhane
Pseudonym?	No
Status:	Key Informant
Keywords:	Good Shepherd Magdalene Laundry, Limerick; institutionalisation; renovation of Magdalene Laundry sites; adoption; illegitimacy.
Date of interview:	December 2008 and August 2011
Transcript:	Six pages
Number/Format of Audio Files:	None
Interviewer:	Evelyn Glynn
Records/Papers included:	None
Access Conditions:	Interviews are freely available to the public
Conditions Governing Reproduction:	Interviews can be reproduced, however the citation below must be used at all times.

To cite this transcript:

Glynn, E. "Oral History of Anne Culhane". In O'Donnell, K., S. Pembroke and C. McGettrick. (2013) *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History*. Government of Ireland Collaborative Research Project, Irish Research Council, pp.1-6.

Anne's career as a nurse in Croom Hospital and subsequent career as a librarian in Limerick School of Art and Design brought her in contact with a number of women who were incarcerated in the Good Shepherd Asylum and the families of women who have come back to visit the former site of the Good Shepherds. Here Anne recalls the stories that have been shared with her.

Limerick School of Art and Design is housed in the former campus of the institutions of the Good Shepherd Sisters.

[Interview begins]

There was a woman called Babe. She had no name, I knew her. I used to work in Croom Hospital and she came out as a patient and she was never visited. She had no surname. She was I'd say in her late seventies or early eighties when she came out to Croom and she was just known as Babe and when she got better the nuns didn't want her. They never came to collect her. So she was sent to Camillus's. It's the old age home, for want of a better word, out the Ennis Rd. She worked in the laundry all her life. She was born here and lived all her life here. And a lot of them were brought into service as soon as they were able to work, because she was never adopted. She was in the orphanage and from there she worked in the laundry all her life until she was sent out and became a patient in Croom. She'd never been outside this building until she was sent to Croom [interview took place in former Magdalene institution building]. I got to know her in Croom Hospital because I suppose I felt sorry for her. She never had any visitors. She had one nightdress. That was it. She was lovely, just such a sweet woman and I started bringing her things, you know - she was lovely. That was in 1978.

My own interest in the laundry would be from working here in the library in LSAD [Limerick School of Art and Design] and I just feel that there is a lot of history in this building and if we don't catch it soon we will lose it. Even this refurbishment which was fantastic, it's absolutely brilliant but at the same time there were so many changes made that more of the history of the building is gone and unless we catch it now it's going to be gone forever. My point is that they have a very bad reputation a lot of them, a lot of these laundries and orphanages, and these homes for unmarried mothers and some of it is deserved but I also think that there's a lot to be said. Some of the backgrounds that those people, children and mothers, came from – to come from those backgrounds to this was actually to move into a better life. This is a place where they would be fed, where they would be clothed, where they would have heat, and a lot of them would not have had that. I mean all you have to do is to read *Angela's Ashes* and to see some of the deprivation and poverty that they put up with. So for a lot of them, to come in here was

actually a step up. It's too easy to be negative and critical about the nuns and yes they did a lot that was not right or good but it has to be taken in the context of the times that were there. Ultimately they did a lot of good as well because they would have trained all the girls who would have left, what would they have been fifteen or sixteen, trained as laundry maids or seamstresses. In fact they were going out into the world with a skill, which otherwise they might not have gotten. Also they all had the minimum education here. When they left they could all read and write. Would they have had that education? Would they even have survived outside without that? I don't know. As I say just working here, I feel the character of the building. I just wish we wouldn't forget it or the people that were here.

The best thing that could ever have happened this place was the School of Art. Again a lot of this is just how I feel. There was a lot of hardship here. There was a lot of sadness, a lot of loneliness. There was a lot of tragedy so for a building to have that amount of it the best thing to do was to bring in these young students and art students by their very nature they are creative and positive. And I just feel if you are talking about energies it's just such a positive force of energy to come in to this building. I think it's perfect. It's like an antidote. That's how I feel about it. The other side is no the school are not doing enough at all. They are not doing enough to acknowledge it. I know there are plans to build a remembrance garden but that is more to celebrate the refurbishment. There is talk of planting rosemary and forget-me-nots, which is lovely. It's fantastic. And an oak tree to symbolise education and a beech tree which symbolises a bridge between the old and the new and I think that is fantastic. I hope they come to pass. I hope that will actually happen but I do think that a lot more could be done. I'm not sure what but the worst thing to do is to hide it because it did happen – that's it.

There have been a few students that have asked about the history of the building but not that many have come to us in the library but then I met a group one day and it was just by chance and something came up about it. It was a group of seven girls and there were two boys in it and every one of them was interested. You know wondering what life must be like here, wondering what age the girls were. Asking if ye ever went upstairs to see the rooms, did ye do this, did ye do that? Wondering what the original church was like. Would they ever consider doing it up to its original state? They were all asking questions. So I actually think that the level among students is extremely high. A few years ago too there was Ian Castles, and he built a memorial, a rose garden, to the women that had died here.

Also there is a lecturer here, she is in first year, Sarah Flaherty and she did some beautiful sculptural fabrics and they are on the laundry and the history of this building. They were on exhibition below in the MacBride Gallery in Killarney. It's funny because I saw them by chance. I knew she was a lecturer here

but I had no idea they were in the exhibition and I went in to see it and there they were and it was beautiful. It was all these linens and lace. Each piece of fabric symbolised one of the women. I thought it was absolutely outstanding. It was really beautiful. And the fact that she was a member of staff here but I had never spoken to her about the building.

There is a story I heard about the phrase 'left holding the baby'. Well the way I heard it was the visitors had to apply for permission to come in and visit. First of all they would have to apply to the Mother Superior. The Mother Superior would then have to get permission from the Bishop. That was actually less of a big thing than it sounds because we're in the parish of St. John's and that's the Bishops parish and he actually had rooms here. So it was really only a matter of form. But when a visitor would come they would have to come between the hours of three and five on a Sunday afternoon. The building was actually slightly different in that the drive was actually longer coming in from the road, more winding. When they knew the visitor was coming she would be ready to receive her visitor. That was fine. They would make all the other unmarried mothers stand at the balcony and hold up their baby so that the visitor could see their shame, their sin, the physical embodiment of their sin. And that's where the expression came from, because they were the ones without visitors, they were the ones *left holding the baby*. And that's where the saying comes from.

There were also what were known as *penitents* here, that would be young girls, and their crimes might have been very simple, like stealing bread in order to survive - but they would be incarcerated over where the Roxtown Health Centre is now. To get to the church there was a tunnel so the public never saw them. Nor could the public see them from the roadway. They were the penitents and then you had the unmarried mothers and then you had the nuns.

The church was divided into sections. Now if you go into the church there is a special place for the nuns high up - the ones that were sick or disabled went up to a special area. Not all the children were adopted, and they would be brought up here, just like Babe, then they would proceed to work into the laundry or the lace making if they were good enough or in some cases to making rosary beads. But they never met their mothers, they would be separated and inside of the church you would have the children separated from their mothers. Can you imagine the pain of that, the mothers, knowing that their child was so close and yet not being able to see them or feel them, to touch them or to talk to them? That was cruel: because to have met them – there was no badness going to come out of that. There was no harm if they did meet. There was a woman I was speaking to and she was raised here and her mother was here and it wasn't until she was leaving that she was told that her mother was one of the

workers here and she subsequently found out that the mother worked in the kitchen and had been one of those feeding her but had never been allowed to say 'I am your mother'.

And of course the other story is, and the one that fascinates me completely, is the story where you are going back to rural Ireland where you'd have farming families. You'd have one son who would inherit the farm. More often than not then if there was a second son he would go on to the priesthood. There were roles more or less laid out for them. But the son that inherited the farm, if he didn't marry when he was younger, he usually stayed on in the home house with his father and mother and effectively was a bachelor until they died. He would have very little say in the running of the place. So picture then he could be in his fifties with no parents. All of a sudden he had nothing. (*What I mean is he would have finally inherited the farm but would not have a wife or family*). Some of them would come in here and they would literally apply for a wife. The women of marriageable age, the unmarried mothers, would be made to line up and he could go up and down and take his pick - select his wife. Now it was a complete win-win situation for him for a number of reasons. First of all, she had proved by having a child already that she was capable of breeding. Number two, he was seen to be a saint of a man; by his community, by the priest and by everyone in general by taking a fallen woman and making an honest woman out of her - taking her into his home. So effectively what he was getting was a slave. A slave to do everything - a domestic slave, a woman to help out on the farm, to cook, to clean and in the bedroom as well. And very often as you can imagine the age gap could have been thirty or forty years. Peculiarly some of those marriages worked out really, really well. Some didn't. Some were horrific absolutely horrific. They were never left to forget where they came from for one minute of their long days. But some of them worked out really well. In some cases, the farmer did not want to take the child out with them - that is officially adopt the child or have the child live with them- *the foal at the heel*. That was the expression for the child of the unmarried mother. But some did. Some actually took the mother and the child and that worked out pretty well.

My mother is now eighty-two, and she plays cards. And over the years she has just become very friendly with a lot of the women who play cards. And the conversation struck up one night at the table where two of them had been selected wives from here. The case of the *foal at the heel* was actually my sister who met that woman and she is living in Co. Limerick and they would have told both my mother and my sister other stories about other women - because they did keep up contact with each other - because they were like a little band of 'you know what I've been through' and how are you getting on and how am I getting on...

I remember being absolutely shocked. But my mother wasn't one bit shocked because she had known of such things for years and years. People knew what was going on but because it was run by nuns you couldn't say a word. I think they thought the nuns were fantastic – that they were saving the fallen women as it were. Because it's only recently that the stigma attached to be unmarried and being pregnant has lifted – thank God. But they were seen to be fantastic – the nuns that is to be saving the fallen... Thanks be to God we have moved on. I do remember the importance then that was placed on a son or a daughter joining the priests or the nuns. They became elevated immediately in the communities that they lived. And my mother often tells the story by where she knew this man down the road who was committing incest with his three daughters, and brutally doing so, but because that was a thing you didn't speak about when you met that man you saluted him or passed the time of day with him. But then when you had another neighbour whose son had left the priesthood, they were told they had to cross the street and keep their eyes downcast rather than have to look at them. So what a warped society it was really.

It's still not fashionable to talk about the Magdalene Laundries. It's not sexy enough now. But then it's like the Industrial Schools. People did not want to talk about them because everyone knew someone who'd been there or worked there. So a lot of people don't actually want to talk about it. But then again we are living in a country that if you knew someone who went to fight in World War I then you didn't want to talk about them because you went to fight for the British. So history has cycles of fashion as well. But it is a pity because if you don't catch some of these things then they are lost.

[Interview continued August 2011]

Since my first interview I have met and spoken with some people of their experiences here. Three nuns called in one day to the library. One had been a novice here, another was visiting from Kenya and the third was clearly a nun in a position of authority. The third nun had spent many years here. They remembered the Library as being the main dining room and noticed that a staircase that had been at the end of the library had been removed. They spoke freely about the changes in the building but when the subject of recent claims against the Good Shepherd convents came up – their demeanour and tones changed. The third nun was very dismissive of the claims. She felt it was being exploited by the media for sensationalism. There was no truth whatsoever to the stories. They (the nuns) rescued these women and did right by them. She was very adamant that no wrongdoing had ever occurred. It was impossible. This was a place of refuge. She asked why were people picking on the nuns. What about the families of the girls who put them in here? Was any blame ever to be attached to them?

Passing by reception one day during the summer break – I noticed a man who looked a little lost. I asked if he was alright. Could I help? He said he was looking for the church. After saying that I would show him the church – he asked if his family could join him – his wife, two daughters and a granddaughter. Subsequently, I showed them around the church and up to the sculpture area – which was the site of the original laundry. As we walked, his story unfolded:

His mother (Bridget) was sent here, as she was pregnant with him. He has vague memories of parts of the building. His overpowering memory was of the 'greyness' of the building – both inside and out. Grey walls, grey floors...his mother was trained into making lace. He remained here for a number of years – 11 I think then his grandfather came for him. He was brought home to work on the farm. He was told daily that he was a bastard and was not and never would be entitled to inherit any part of the farm and he should thank them for providing him with food and shelter. His mother was left inside in the convent. As he grew older, he began asking questions about his mother and secretly started to save money when and where he could. When he was in his early twenties he came in to the convent. He remembered the shards of glass protruding from the tops of the walls to prevent the girls escaping. I'm not sure if he 'broke' in or came in on some other pretext but one way or the other, he got his mother out. To use his expression – he 'sprung her'.

They made their way to New York. This was in the early sixties and passport control was not as it is now! He was young and fit and quickly got work on building sites. She took in jobs as a seamstress. After living in New York, they moved to California and from there to Tucson, Arizona. Bridget died last year. One of her last wishes was that her son should bring his children back to the convent where she had been incarcerated. She wanted them to see what it was like. She wanted them to remember for her. She felt it was important that the past is not forgotten so that it may never happen again.

[Interview ends]