

# THE MAGDALENE SISTERS

by Peter MULLAN

## FICHE TECHNIQUE

Pays (country) : GB / Irlande

Durée (running time) : 2h

Année (year) : 2002

Genre : drama

Scénario : Peter MULLAN based on Steve Humphries' *Sex in a Cold Climate*, a documentary denouncing the Magdalene Asylums, televised in March 1998 as part of Channel Four's *Witness* series

Directeur de la photographie : Nigel WILLOUGHBY

Montage : Colin MONIE

Musique : Craig ARMSTRONG

Coproduction : PFP Films / Temple Films / Scottish Screen / The Film Council / The Irish Film Board

Distribution : Mars Distribution

Interprètes (cast) : Anne-Marie DUFF (Margaret), Nora-Jane NOONE (Bernadette), Dorothy DUFFY (Rose / Patricia), Eileen WALSH (Crispina), Geraldine McEWAN (the mother superior Sister Bridget), Sean COLGAN (Seamus), Peter MULLAN (Mr O'Connor)

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## SYNOPSIS

The tradition of the Magdalene laundries in Ireland was condoned by the parents of girls who showed signs of sexual independence. The laundries were convents, where the miscreants were banished after committing sins of the flesh, real or imaginary, such as having a baby out of wedlock, or flirting with boys. Once inside, they were treated as slave labour and allowed no privileges. Sometimes, they remained there for the rest of their lives, while the Church benefited financially and the word of the Lord prevailed.

The film follows the experience of three girls in the mid-sixties, who are virtually kidnapped, with their parents' approval, and removed by force to one of those places. Margaret is raped by her cousin during a wedding party and the shame on the family is such that she is whisked off by the morality police without explanation or possibility of appeal. Rose is lying in a bed at the Maternity Wing when her father arrives with a priest. Her baby is taken away from her, she is forced to sign adoption papers and she finds herself in the convent dormitory. Bernadette has dancing eyes and a wicked smile. She teases the boys because it is fun and she does not care. Although a virgin, she is taken to the Magdalene convent as a precautionary measure, to keep her out of trouble.

*En Irlande, dans le comté de Dublin en 1964. Lors d'un mariage, Margaret est violée par son cousin. La honte s'abat sur toute la famille. Au petit matin, le curé de la paroisse vient chercher Margaret. Bernadette est pensionnaire dans un orphelinat. En grandissant, devenue jolie, elle suscite la convoitise des jeunes gens du quartier. Considérant que sa nature et son caractère la destinent au pire, la direction de l'orphelinat la confie alors à l'unique institution susceptible de la maintenir dans le droit chemin. Rose, qui n'est pas mariée, vient de donner naissance à un petit garçon. Séparée de son bébé, elle est emmenée au couvent des sœurs de Marie-Madeleine. Les trois jeunes femmes sont immédiatement confrontées à Sœur Bridget, qui dirige l'établissement et leur explique comment, par le travail et la prière, elles expieront leurs péchés et sauveront leurs âmes.*

*The Magdalene Sisters s'inspire de l'histoire de milliers de femmes rejetées par leurs familles et livrées à l'église. Déclarées « filles perdues », incarcérées sans avoir commis de méfait, elles étaient pauvres, orphelines, victimes de viol, parfois fille-mère. Les Magdalene Homes ont été créés en Irlande au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ils doivent leur nom à Marie-Madeleine, une pécheresse devenue sainte femme après s'être repentie aux pieds de Jésus qui la laissa les lui laver. A l'aube du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ces institutions sont reprises par l'Eglise, placées sous la direction des Sœurs de la Miséricorde, à la discipline de fer, et transformées en laveries. Les pensionnaires y travaillent dix heures par jour, sept jours sur sept, coupées du monde, lavant le linge des hôtels, des universités. Grâce à la puissance du clergé, ces institutions sont maintenues jusque dans les années 70. Il faudra cependant attendre 1996 pour que le dernier de ces couvents-prisons soit fermé.*

## PISTES PÉDAGOGIQUES

### Themes evoked:

- Imprisonment
- Female exploitation
- Abusive power and cruelty
- Catholic beliefs in Ireland in the 1960s

### Teaching materials:

- Photo tirée du film (anticipation, suppositions “sisters”)
- Article from ABC News website (checking hypotheses, rules: obligation and interdiction, opposing the position of the Church and that of the film director’s, writing a film review...)



### THOUSANDS ENSLAVED BY IRELAND'S CATHOLIC CHURCH Wounds Still Fresh For Thousands of Women Enslaved by the Catholic Church

By Hilary Brown and Matt McGarry

abc NEWS.com

Over a period of 150 years, an estimated 30,000 women were imprisoned by the Catholic Church and forced to work without pay. (ABCNEWS.com)

**C O R K, Ireland, Jan. 26** – A sudden spate of TV exposés, docudramas and a major motion picture have brought to light one of the most shocking episodes in the history of the Catholic Church in Ireland – the existence of the now-notorious “Magdalene laundries”, a sanctified form of slavery.

Operated by the Sisters of the Magdalene Order, the laundries were virtual slave labor camps for generations of young girls thought to be unfit to live in Irish society.

Girls who had become pregnant, even from rape, girls who were illegitimate, or orphaned, or just plain simple-minded, girls who were too pretty and therefore in “moral danger” all ran the risk of being locked up and put to work, without pay, in profit-making, convent laundries, to “wash away their sins”.

They were completely cut off from their families, and many lost touch with them forever.

Stripped of their identities, the girls were given numbers instead of names. They were forbidden to speak, except to pray. If they broke any rule or tried to escape, the nuns beat them over the head with heavy iron keys, put them into solitary confinement or shipped them off to a mental hospital.

Over a period of 150 years, an estimated 30,000 women were forced into this brutal penance, carried out in secret, behind high convent walls.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the laundries began to close, as the power of the Church in Ireland diminished and as social attitudes became less puritanical. Incredibly, the last Magdalene laundry to shut down was in 1996.

### ‘We Were the Living Dead’

Mary Norris, 69, was committed to a convent laundry in Cork for two years. An articulate, intelligent woman, she was transferred from an orphanage at age 15 because she was “disobedient”. Her number was 30.

On one occasion, she said, the nuns actually ordered the girls to pray for those held in Soviet prison camps, a bitter irony, as she considers the convent laundries “an Irish gulag”.

Though it was clearly very painful for her, she took us around the convent – now abandoned – where she had suffered so much.

“In the winter, it was freezing cold, and in the summer, it was like the desert, it was so hot with the steam”, she said. “We were the living dead. We weren’t treated as human beings, as individuals. We were just part of the workforce. Nothing more, nothing less”.

### **Guilt by Illegitimacy**

Sadie Williams, 64, spent a total of four years in two different convent laundries. She was 14 when she was virtually kidnapped by two women who had determined that she was “in moral danger”. Williams liked to take a walk in the evenings, after working all day at a bed and breakfast in Dublin. She said the women considered her much too attractive to stay out of trouble.

She was only 14 when she ended up in a convent laundry outside town as “Number 100”, and locked into a cell each night. She says she almost never saw daylight.

“Oh, it was dreadful”, she said. “I cried and cried all the time, and kept asking why, why wasn’t I getting out. And I would write begging letters to my mother. When I finally got out, she was already dead and buried three years. But I was never told, even though I was writing, still writing letters to her”.

She has since learned that the nuns stopped all her mail. Her mother wasn’t married, so Sadie was considered to be guilty of the sin of illegitimacy.

### **No Apology**

There have been no direct reparations from the Irish Catholic Church to the tens of thousands of women it used as slave labor. Nor has there been a formal apology. It’s not even known how many victims of the Magdalene laundries are still alive: they are not organized, and many don’t want to talk about this terrible part of their past.

Very few Churchmen in Ireland will comment on the scandal. An exception is Willie Walsh, the Bishop of Killaloe. Over a cup of tea in his residence, he said that it is “a source of pain and shame”.

“These girls were rejected by society, and the Church in some way thought it was giving refuge to these girls”, he says. “I suppose [...] the Magdalene laundries was in some instances a form of slavery”.

The Rev. Patrick O’Donovan is more outspoken.

“It’s an appalling scandal”, he says. “You could compare them to concentration camps. [...] The nuns thought they were doing good. [...] They didn’t realize the damage they were doing”.

Mary Norris has campaigned to have a simple memorial built in the convent where she was held. Thirty names are engraved on a simple headstone; dating from 1876 to 1973. Some women spent their entire lives in these institutions. Having been cut off from their families, they had nowhere to go.

Norris says she no longer hates the nuns who oppressed her. “If I hated them”, she says, “they’d still be winning. They’d still have control over me”.

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<http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=129865&page=1>

### **BIBLIOGRAPHIE**

- [www.catholicnews.com](http://www.catholicnews.com), a Catholic criticism of the film (film denounced by the Vatican the same day it won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival)
- <http://film.guardian.co.uk>, a complete review
- [www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A971264](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A971264), an interview with Peter Mullan

# The Magdalene Laundries

Song by Joni Mitchell

I was an unmarried girl  
I'd just turned twenty-seven  
When they sent me to the sisters  
For the way men looked at me  
Branded as a jezebel  
I knew I was not bound for Heaven  
I'd be cast in shame  
Into the Magdalene laundries

Most girls come here pregnant  
Some by their own fathers  
Bridget got that belly  
By her parish priest  
We're trying to get things white as snow  
All of us woe-begotten-daughters  
In the streaming stains  
Of the Magdalene laundries

Prostitutes and destitutes  
And temptresses like me  
Fallen women  
Sentenced into dreamless drudgery  
Why do they call this heartless place  
Our Lady of Charity?  
Oh charity!

These bloodless brides of Jesus  
If they had just once glimpsed their groom  
Then they'd know and they'd drop the stones  
Concealed behind their rosaries  
They wilt the grass they walk upon  
They leech the light out of a room  
They'd like to drive us down the drain  
At the Magdalene laundries

Peg O'Connell died today  
She was a cheeky girl  
A flirt  
They just stuffed her in a hole!  
Surely to God you'd think at least some bells should ring!  
One day I'm going to die here too  
And they'll plant me in the dirt  
Like some lame bulb  
That never blooms come any spring  
Not any spring  
No, not any spring  
Not any spring

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