



## A VISIBLE MEMORIAL FOR GALWAY'S MAGDALENE WOMEN

Galway City Council decided this past week to remove a statue memorializing the women who lived, worked and, in some cases, died at the Sisters of Mercy Magdalene laundry in the city. Dedicated in March 2009, the Mick Wilkin's statue was commissioned by the same city councilors who now seek to remove it. It is located at the corner of Forster Street and Bothár Breandan O Eithir, standing in full public view close to where the laundry institution once stood.

The memorial itself is straightforward in its composition. A woman stands, dressed in drab institutional garb, holding a bed-sheet aloft behind her back. The bed-sheet signifies the woman's work, the endless hours of forced labour associated with these commercial laundries. The sheet works on a symbolic level too. The woman has emerged as if from beneath a shroud. She steps into the public arena. The statue announces an identity long held secret by Irish society.

And yet, the sheet/shroud remains insistently at hand, signaling the possibility that the woman may again be cloaked with invisibility, hidden away in the present just as she was disappeared in the past. Galway City Council's plan to remove the statue realizes this potential.

A few summers ago I visited Galway and together with Patricia Burke Brogan walked along Forster Street to the former Magdalene laundry site. Author of the plays *Eclipsed* and *Stained Glass at Samhain*, Brogan at the time was one of the prime advocates for a Galway memorial. Her poetry adorns the plaque at the foot of the statue:

*Make visible the Tree  
its branches ragged  
with washed out linens  
of a bleached shroud*

Brogan pointed out where the proposed statue would stand if it were to be erected. The organizing committee had already encountered stiff opposition, especially from the local parish priest. The statue would stand a mere stone's throw from the entrance to the local church. Was it really necessary for mass-goers to be reminded of days gone by?

It would also stand in the shadow of the new Discover Ireland/Aras Failte building. Tourists visiting the glass-adorned information center would be confronted with the statue's reflection, mirrored back at them as they looked to uncover the national heritage. The reflection would sit awkwardly alongside glossy images of thatched cottages and traditional pub scenes displayed in the windows.

Diagonally across from the tourist office stands the building that replaced the Magdalene laundry. The nuns sold the site in the early 1990s. The buildings were demolished. And today the local Anglo-Irish Bank branch stands in its stead. Not much has changed really. Gross exploitation and immoral business practices predate the Celtic Tiger boom.



There are social forces in Ireland—including Church, State, and Economic—who would welcome the removal of the Magdalene statue. This in itself may be a good enough reason why it should remain where it stands. Galway City Council points to the need for an additional “bus lane.” But improved public transportation should not trump the need to redress historical injustice.

There is another, more pressing reason the memorial should remain in place. As we continued our walk, Patricia Burke Brogan directed me to the back of the bank building, past the new town houses and condominiums, alongside the old 12 foot high stone wall with broken glass bottles cemented on top, past the “Private Property” signs, in through the imposing gates at the rear of the Sisters of Mercy’s convent. We were trespassing.

Immediately, I was struck by the relatively modern bungalow style building—I counted twelve frosted bathroom windows. The individual apartments housed women who worked in the Magdalene. These survivors continued to live in the care of the nuns even though the laundry closed almost twenty years earlier. Neither families nor society in general claim responsibility for these women.

Turning to our right inside the gate, at the back of a small patch of lawn, and positioned directly under the aforementioned stone wall, stood six black marble headstones. Each head stone listed twelve women’s names in gold lettering. The dates ranged from the late nineteenth century up to the 1980s.

These seventy-two women were the “Consecrated Magdalenes,” women who, after a probationary period in the laundry, undertook a religious vow to remain in the institution for life. They chose to forego liberty and material possessions and accepted a life of prayer and servitude. Their earthly reward was the promise of burial on convent grounds.

Galway’s ordinary “penitent” women, it should be noted, were buried in what amounts to a mass grave at Bohermore cemetery in the city.

When the laundry buildings were demolished the “consecrated” graves were in the way of the new development. And so the bodies were exhumed and re-interred at their present location.

Galway’s City Council this week decided that the Magdalene memorial statue is also in the way. It too impedes progress.

There is talk of relocating the statue, although the treatment meted out to the Padraic O’Conaire statue, formerly at Eyre Square, does not augur well in this regard. City councilors might well decide on an out of the way side street, off the beaten track, away from the glare of mass-goers, tourists, and the city’s financial gurus. Or, the statue might suffer a similar fate to that which befell an Edward Delaney sculpture: it was temporarily removed from close to the Quincentenary Bridge in Galway only to be dumped because someone believed it scrap metal.

To borrow Patricia Burke Brogan’s words, “*Mak[ing] visible*” is precisely what the Galway Magdalene memorial is all about. The survivor advocacy group Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) calls on Galway’s City Council to reverse its decision and leave the statue where its cultural resonance remains strongest—on the public thoroughfare, in full view of locals and visitors, near where the laundry itself stood. To do otherwise is to “bleach” clean society’s complicity in the abuses meted out to women and young girls in these institutions. Victims and survivors alike deserve better.

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