

Translation

Background:

The Magdalene laundries were institutions run by nuns. Some of the women in the laundries were unmarried mothers, others were locked away for what was euphemistically described as their own protection. Yet more were young girls transferred directly from the industrial schools.

Mary Norris ended up in a Magdalene laundry for disobeying an order. A teenage servant in Kerry, she took a forbidden night off, and was taken away to a convent where the nuns had her examined to see was she still a virgin (which she was). From there she was dispatched to the Magdalene laundry in Cork. Immediately on arrival, the nuns changed her name – standard practice in all the Magdalene laundries. "When I went in there," recalls Mary, "my dignity, who I was, my name, everything was taken. I was a nonentity, nothing, nobody."¹

In 1993, property held by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge in Dublin which once served as a convent laundry was to be sold to a developer for public use. It was known at that time that some 133 graves existed, unmarked, in a cemetery on the convent grounds. The bodies were exhumed and reburied in Glasnevin cemetery. However, when the exhumation began, a further 22 unnamed and unrecorded bodies were found. Later, when the remains exhumed from High Park Convent were reinterred at Glasnevin cemetery, memorial gravestones were installed.² The poem 'Translation' was read at the reburial ceremony.

The last Magdalene laundry closed in 1996.



¹ Mary Raftery in the Guardian newspaper, June 2011

² Adapted from 'Justice for Magdalenes' – The National Women's Council of Ireland

Summary and analysis:

The poet is concerned here with giving a voice to the voiceless. She is also keen that as well as the Magdalene women who suffered under a cruel and oppressive regime, we remember that the nuns who ran the laundries were not solely to blame but were acting on the authority of and with the approval of the government and society at large: 'Women from orphanages, Magdalene homes, mother-and-baby homes -and their families -are insisting on the stories of these places - their loneliness, hardship, and not infrequent cruelty - being told. The Irish appetite for history asserts itself again, demanding recognition for events which were supposed to be outside history. As so often in the past thirty or so years, it is clear that the politics of Catholic Ireland are centred on the personal, sexual, and familial and that the live issues of the day spring from the need to acknowledge the past. While nuns figure in the stories that are being told now, they are flanked by others, perhaps the real authority figures: priests, doctors, and policemen. In the background are the politicians and bureaucrats who decide how little would be paid, and when nothing would be paid, for the upkeep of the powerless.'³

The poem opens with a description of the ground in Glasnevin cemetery. It has been broken up by the gravediggers in preparation for the reburial. In some ways, this might be seen to 'even the score' as the women are finally being recognised and properly interred. The grave will contain remains of women from every county in Ireland, just as the mourners come from all over the country. The women in the laundries – wherever their places of origin - were linked by injustice and cruelty, now those who come to see them laid to rest are linked by a recognition of this injustice.

The second stanza brings us into the laundry itself. The opening is rather obscure: 'White light blinded and bleached out / The high relief of a glance'. It could refer to a statue high above the workers (the word 'relief' hints at that) which is bleached by the rising steam so that it cannot be seen clearly nor can its gaze fall on the workers. If it is a religious statue, then it can offer no comfort as it is 'blinded' and 'bleached out'. This description may also refer to high windows which offer no relief to those who hope to glimpse the outside world: the bright light shining in and the rising steam mean that nothing can be seen and the confinement of the laundry room remains absolute. The word 'blinded' is an interesting one and could also be seen to refer to the blindness of society to these women's plight. Ni Chuilleanin often uses architecture as a metaphor and in her poem 'Bessboro' about the

³ Ni Chuilleanain, 'Nuns: A Subject for the Women Writer', p.29.

mother and baby home in Cork, she sees the 'high blind windows' as hiding the history of the place. ⁴

The language in the remainder of the second stanza contrasts the misery of the women's working lives with the gaiety and fun more generally associated with youth. The steam dances, giggles and slips down drains and across water. There is an irony to this as the women have no such opportunity for levity or uninhibited movement. We might also think of children who dance and giggle: any children born to these unfortunate women were quickly taken from them and placed for adoption.

In the third stanza, the poet calls on us to help these women as they go to their final rest. The imperative 'Assist them now' brings to mind the words of a prayer, which is fitting in the context of the poem. The women are reduced to small piles of remains lying under the earth and leaving only raised ridges to show where they lie. They are described as being under a veil, which can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, they are hidden from sight by the 'veil' of the earth. But of course the word 'veil' also reminds us of the nuns who ran these institutions; their actions and their treatment of the women were hidden or veiled from the outside world as they were protected by the Church. Ni Chuilleanain also used this image of the veil in her poem about the Bessboro mother and baby home, describing the mist and rain as veiling the building and obscuring its story.

The spirits of these women are 'shifting' under the earth as they search for their identity. It is easy to imagine how they might not rest in peace when we consider the way they were treated in life and the anonymity and indignity of their first burial.

The poet imagines one voice attempting to be heard above the 'shuffle and hum' of work in the laundry. The imagery used to describe the women's work is overwhelmingly negative. The soap they use is compared to 'rotten teeth' as it is shrinks to a ragged edge, and the women's grasp of the clothes is 'melted' in the scalding water they use. Their desperation and cry for help is futile as only 'The edges of words' can be heard against the grinding of the machinery.

But the voice 'Had begun' and is at last being heard, albeit from the mouths of others who have taken up their cause.

⁴ "The Architectural metaphor in the poetry of Eilean Ni Chuilleanain." 2007 Irish University Review 20 Apr. 2015

Finally the voice is loud enough to be heard, perhaps even by a nun who worked in the laundry and was, in her own way a victim of the attitudes of Irish society at that time. We can all hear of the injustice now and it is as loud and unignorable as 'an infant's cry'. By mentioning the baby, the poet reminds us of all those infants who were taken from their mothers soon after birth.

Grass may take root on the grave, but the memory of the steam from the laundry will still rise to form a cloud over our country's history.

The laundry, which was intended to wash away the Magdalene women's sins, has also washed the workers clean of 'idiom' or names which were used to diminish and demean them. They were also given 'temporary names' when they entered the laundry and left their past behind, just as the nuns who entered the convent took saint's names to signify the beginning of a new life.

The final stanza of the poem can also be seen as referring to the nun who bore the 'bunched keys' of the laundry. Her role as prison guard over these women has ended and she too, can rest in peace now. The 'parasite' or 'spell' that grew within her has gone and she can rest in peace. The poet shows compassion for all of those who were involved in the laundries and recognises that the nuns were reflecting society's attitudes towards the 'fallen' women. Those who tacitly supported the laundries have escaped unscathed, by and large, and left the religious orders to take the brunt of the blame.

The title of the poem now makes sense to the reader as we see that she has translated the women's suffering and their forced silence into words.