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'Do Penance or Perish': A Study of Magdalen Asylums in  
Ireland (review)

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women of all ages to protection against bodily assault" (92). Whether as victim or perpetrator, women received more understanding and sympathy from a justice system that nevertheless remained male dominated. In balancing that argument with evidence of continuing hypocrisy and tendencies toward blaming the victim, this intricate study is far more convincing than the long-established image of cross-class male collusion to oppress women, providing a subtle and enlightening analysis of gender and its utility in understanding not only the victims but also the perpetrators of violence.

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J. Carter Wood

*'Do Penance or Perish': A Study of Magdalen Asylums in Ireland.* By Frances Finnegan (Piltown, Co. Kilkenny: Congrave Press, 2001. xii plus 256 pp.).

The title of this book raises the hopes of Irish social historians, because it addresses an aspect of Irish history that has been neglected by historians at the same time that it has received a great deal of attention from journalists and filmmakers. Drawing primarily on the records of the Good Shepherd Sisters, who operated four magdalen asylums in Ireland, Finnegan explores the impulses that guided the founding of each of the asylums, the transformation in the function of the asylums from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and the place of the asylum in Irish society. She makes extensive comparisons between Irish and British asylums, to reinforce the point that Irish institutions developed along a distinctly different path, mainly because of the distinct religious character of the Irish institutions.

The Irish magdalen asylum had its roots in the Victorian rescue movement, and many of the magdalen asylums began as lay efforts to rescue and reform prostitutes. Indeed, the first Good Shepherd asylum in Ireland, opened in Limerick in 1848, began as a lay movement; the Good Shepherds came to Ireland at the request of the asylum's original founders. The Good Shepherds, an enclosed French order, were founded specifically to save "fallen women" from their own base impulses. Because of their emphasis on sexual immorality and fallen women, according to Finnegan, the arrival of the Good Shepherds in Ireland was a momentous occasion in the history of Irish magdalen asylums: "The repercussions for Irish society were far reaching, as the French order was to be the driving force in the country's Magdalen movement for almost a century and a half." (p. 51)

Finnegan documents the circumstances that guided the formation of each of the four Good Shepherd asylums in Ireland. In Limerick and Waterford the Sisters were invited to assume control of existing lay asylums. The third asylum, opened in New Ross, Co. Wexford, in 1860, was the least successful of the three asylums, because of its proximity to the Waterford asylum and because of a lack of support for it within the community. This asylum was opened so that the Good Shepherds could establish their own provincial house, and thus

a novitiate, in Ireland. In spite of its shaky beginnings, however, the New Ross asylum continued to operate until 1969. The Good Shepherd Sisters opened their fourth asylum in Cork in 1871 as a direct response to the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Finnegan posits that although the Good Shepherd magdalen asylums had their roots in both the Victorian rescue movement and implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, their function changed over time. The Victorian notion of rescue dictated that women enter an asylum for a period of reform, but ultimately they would return to the “real world” as respectable citizens. But the Good Shepherds insisted on long-term committals, in some cases for life, which both defeated the purpose of reform and limited the number of women who could be rescued. Prostitutes were unwilling to submit themselves for extended periods of time, and by the end of the nineteenth century very few of the women who entered the Good Shepherd asylums were, in fact, prostitutes. Finnegan further posits that conditions in the asylums were so bad that prostitutes increasingly refused to enter them. As the admission of prostitutes decreased, the Sisters began to broaden their category of “fallen” women to include unmarried mothers, girls in danger of “falling”, and girls in need of “protection”. Finnegan also notes that many women were classified in the admission registers as “feeble-minded”, suggesting that their prospects for self-sufficiency in the real world were limited.

The potential of Finnegan’s subtitle, *A Study of Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* is never fully realized, for two main reasons. First, Finnegan is unapologetic in asserting the bias that underpins her work. She insists that women who were admitted to magdalen asylums in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were victims of “indifference” and “injustice”. Women probably were victims of injustice and indifference (although it is likely that they were victimized by their families and communities as much as they were victimized by the Good Shepherds). However, because Finnegan insists on portraying women only as victims, she rejects other possible interpretations of her source material. Furthermore, Finnegan reaches conclusions about women’s experiences and motivations that are not entirely supported by the available evidence. For example, she concludes, solely on the basis of the scant information included in admission registers, that the majority of women admitted to the asylums were admitted against their will. This may, in fact, be true, but lacking personal accounts from the women themselves, we can never know definitively. But, in reaching these conclusions, Finnegan effectively strips women of their agency and reduces them to infants incapable of or unwilling to assert their power and individuality.

A second problem is that Finnegan places the Good Shepherd Sisters at the center of the magdalen movement in Ireland, and she insists that the Good Shepherd asylums were representative of the magdalen system as a whole. But Finnegan ignores the fact that the Good Shepherds ran only four of the dozen or so magdalen asylums scattered throughout the country (there were at least five asylums in Dublin alone, none of which was run by the Good Shepherds). The Good Shepherds were not the only, or even the most active, agents in the magdalen movement in twentieth century Ireland, so to conclude that the founding mission and ethos of the Good Shepherd Sisters shaped and guided the movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not entirely convincing. Un-

fortunately, because of Finnegan's narrow focus, and because she presents her bias at the very outset, her book at times reads like little more than a personal vendetta against the Good Shepherd Sisters.

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*Wandering Paysanos: State and Subaltern Experience in Buenos Aires during the Rosas Era.* By Ricardo D. Salvatore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. 544 pp. \$59.95).

This detailed and provocative analysis of the Rosas Era questions engrained assumptions about the nature of Caudillo politics in post-independence Argentina and, one might add, Latin America. The stated purpose of this book is to reevaluate the nature of subaltern politics during the Rosas Era. Building on the theoretical insights of peasant and subaltern studies, Ricardo Salvatore successfully challenges the notion that subalterns were passively subjected either to a harsh feudal-like system or to a totalitarian regime that manipulated and fooled them with a populist language.

Through a meticulous analysis of military and judicial records, Salvatore brings to the light different facets of the subaltern experience during the Rosas Era. Linking wandering to resistance, he presents a rich portrait of the various ways in which the subaltern used mobility to improve their labor and military situation. He proves that wages and mobility, not serf-like attachment to haciendas, characterized labor relations during the Rosas Era. According to Salvatore, peons' mobility in a labor scarce economy allowed them to bargain for better salaries and working conditions. Wandering helped the subaltern in other ways. Salvatore shows how soldiers deserted—or threatened to—to bargain for better military conditions. He also shows how peons sought to escape military demands and to redefine their relationship with the state by migrating, changing identity, and reinventing a new political and military persona.

Salvatore also invites the reader to take the political ideology of the Rosas regime seriously. Going beyond facile assessment of Rosas as a tyrannical seducer and manipulator of the masses, Salvatore analyzes the complex ways in which the Rosas state and the subaltern engaged each other. He replaces seduction and manipulation with hegemony and bargaining. There is more at stake than a mere change of terminology; imbedded in this new language is an understanding of politics and ideology as a two way process between the subaltern and the state. Through the analysis of laws, dress codes, and state ceremonies, he provides a nuanced analysis of politics, showing the connection between Rosas egalitarian rhetoric and the republican ideology of the Age of Revolution. He also shows that if, on the one hand, state laws and ceremonies served the state's didactic and hegemonic projects, on the other hand, subalterns became knowledgeable and invested in Rosas' republican egalitarian rhetoric, which they used to push for their rights and to emphasize the contractual nature of their relationship with the state.