



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



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Oral History of:	Johanna Barrett
Pseudonym?	Yes
Status:	Relative
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Interviewer:	Maeve O'Rourke
Records/Papers included:	Yes, see end of transcript for records and citation instructions.
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Note Regarding Interview

This interview is one of 22 testimonies gathered by Justice for Magdalenes (JFM, now JFM Research) as part of its submission to the *Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries (IDC)*. To avoid the need for survivors and other interviewees to give multiple interviews, those who gave their testimony were given the option to include their transcripts in the archive of this project. The JFM testimony gathering process became the pilot phase of this project, and it was carried out with financial support from the *Feminist Review Trust*.

Notes on Redaction and Transcription Process

Interviewee Initials: JB
Interviewer Initials: MOR

Key

... = Short pause (or where words are repeated or the speaker changes direction mid-sentence)
(*pause*) = Long pause
blabla = spoken with great emphasis
(*blabla*) = Additional audible expressions, body language
[blabla] = background information that might be helpful

Notes on Redaction Process

- Named individuals have been assigned pseudonyms
- Some locations have been removed

List of Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Status/Relationship to Interviewee
Johanna Barrett	Interviewee
Bridget Barrett	Interviewee's grandaunt who was in laundry
Sr Maura Roche	Third Party Religious
John Barrett	Interviewee's father
Brian Barrett	Interviewee's granduncle
Thomas Barrett	Interviewee's great-grandfather
Margaret Barrett	Interviewee's great-grandmother
Hannah	Interviewee's grandaunt's Magdalene house name

Basic Data from Interview (relating to Magdalene relative)

Pseudonym	Bridget Barrett
When Born	1900
Born outside marriage?	Didn't say
Raised by	Family
Education	Didn't say
Order	Good Shepherd Sisters
Laundry	Limerick

From	1928
To	1973
Duration of stay	45 years
Age on entry	40? or 28?
Entered Via	Possibly parish priest
House Name/No	Yes
Haircutting/punishment?	Not known
Circumstances of Departure	Died in laundry
Emigrated?	No, died in laundry
Physical ailments?	Hypertension
Of Note	

[Consent process]

MOR *Alright. So, please give your full name.*

JB My name is Johanna Barrett. [Pseudonym]

MOR *And before we begin, I'd just like to ask you to confirm that you agree to participate in the interview voluntarily and that you're familiar with the consent forms I provided to you.*

JB Yes.

[Interview Begins]

MOR *So, when and where were you born?*

JB I was born in Limerick City, in 1982. [Identifying detail removed]

MOR *And can you tell me about your family, how many members are in your family?*

JB So I grew up in [location removed], which is [location in Southern Ireland removed]. It's on the border between [locations removed]. That's where my father's family have always lived, as far as we know, back to the famine, let's say. I'm one of three siblings, I'm the eldest. My father has a local restaurant which his mother owned, and my mother's a primary school teacher. And I guess, yeah, my father's family on all sides is from...sort of...the local area and the villages around. I don't know what else would be helpful?

MOR *Okay. And where's your Mum from?*

JB She's from [location removed], which is [location in Southern Ireland removed], sort of the next county over.

MOR *Okay. So we'll ask questions that relate directly to what we're looking for the committee's inquiry, [the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the*

Magdalen Laundries (IDC)] but also just general ones because the oral history is of course, I suppose, a larger project and...

JB Yeah. Okay.

MOR *So, do your family still live there in [location removed], in [location removed]?*

JB Yeah. But my Dad is sort of the last of his father's family. He's sort of the last...let's say, child of those siblings to live in Ireland. All of the other siblings either didn't have children or emigrated. So I guess my brother is sort of the last male Barrett of that line that's still living in Ireland. My sister lives in Dublin, and my brother lives in Limerick.

MOR Okay. *And what do you do now?*

JB I'm a lecturer in law at the University of [location of UK university removed], and I study law and religion. Yeah, so...

MOR *So what's your...do you have any previous experience of...I mean, general experience of the Magdalene Laundries?*

JB Only what I had read, what I had kind of vaguely come across in my own reading. Not even...I hadn't even done focused research on the area. And then...sort of...I had the same awareness that a lot of people of my generation would have from sort of popular culture, films. So I knew of the existence of the Magdalene Laundries. When I started to read a little bit more about Justice for Magdalenes I read the various publications which were produced, and got to know a little bit more about it. But it certainly wasn't something that I had heard about in detail, and I hadn't heard anything about a family connection to the laundries until July of last year.

MOR *So do you want to tell me about your family connection and the story that goes along with that?*

JB Yeah, so I am part of an academic collective [identifying details removed] and you, Maeve O'Rourke, who is interviewing me now, had been posting about the laundries. And I went home in July of last year for a longer time than I normally would because my mother was quite ill at the time, and I must have mentioned something about the work or maybe something about the

report, or maybe we had seen something in the newspaper. And my mother said to me, 'you know, your father's aunt...one of your father's aunts, was in the laundry,' and sort of called him in to tell me this. And he sort of confirmed it, but he didn't have any significant information about it. He said he thought maybe she had had a child. But, sort of, to give that a little bit of context, my father's father was, you know, quite an old man, or not an old man, but you know, an old father. And so he died in the late 70s and, sort of, the last member of that family of siblings to die died in 1983. So the people who would have had all of that detail just aren't alive any more. I mean, there may be, you know, cousins in London or in the United States who may have heard more detail about what actually happened through their families. But certainly, if it's something that my father knows more about, it wasn't something he said more about. But to kind of give that context as well, you know, my mother then started to tell stories about her own family and her experience of sort of growing up, and being aware that girls of her generation had sort of, you know, if they became pregnant when they were in school, that this was something that was frowned upon. And so, in an atmosphere, or at a moment when my mother was speaking about it quite liberally, nothing more was said. So I don't know if that's something he wasn't interested in saying more about or whether he just doesn't know. And I remember he did make some sort of remark that he was quite, not, amused isn't quite the right word, but sort of, 'and look at you a feminist, and didn't you have...and you had, you are connected to one of these women who was put in one of these places.' So...so I don't really know what to make of it. But as it had happened, I had seen a picture, probably on a blog or somewhere at some point of a photograph of the gravestones in the Good Shepherd convent in Limerick. I believe there was a campaign to place name stones where there had previously been an unmarked grave.¹ And I remember that I had noticed that there was a Bridget Barrett [pseudonym] on it. You know the way you'd notice your own surname. But Bridget is such a common name, and Barrett is a really common name in [locations removed]. So I didn't think any more about it. But when my father had told me that, I went and looked at the census online and sure enough, this girl's name was Bridget Barrett. And so I think I got back in contact with you, and you put me in touch with Justice for Magdalenes and they gave me some advice about what I should do if I wanted to get in touch with the Good Shepherd sisters. And so I sent an email. I sent an email to the address that JFM provided me with and I asked a number of questions about...you know, I said I believed that a relative of mine, my father's aunt, had died in their care. I gave the date on the gravestone, which was 1973, and I asked a number of questions like: When had she

¹ See MAGOHP62/John Gilligan

gone in? Did they know why? What sort of work did she do in the laundry? Was her death registered? What was the cause of death? And so on. And I had an email from Sr Maura Roche [pseudonym] who is based in Waterford with the Good Shepherd order, and she said that she could release some information to me if I had the consent of the next-of-kin. And we emailed and she said that would be my grandfather or my father. And so then we had a telephone call to clarify what I would need to do to get this information. And so I spoke to her on the phone, and I spoke to her with a view to ascertaining what I would need to put in this letter, or what my father would need to put in this letter. And I do remember that she kind of took a moment to say that I had to understand that confidentiality was the key issue here. And I remember being...you know, I was quite indignant. But I didn't say anything to her because I didn't want to jeopardise...I knew from the JFM website that people with a much more, let's say a much more direct interest in finding out this sort of information than I have, had had difficulty, so I didn't sort of say, you know, 'I'm a lawyer, I'm an academic, be afraid of me and my research capacities,' you know! Then I remember that before she put down the phone she said, 'God bless.' And I remember thinking I could have done without that, you know. And not because, I just...it may just be a matter of habit for her, I assume it's a matter of habit for her, but I could have done without the mention of God. And she did stress to me that the records that were available were very, very limited. But I thought that I would like to have them anyway. So I got my Dad to sign this letter, I remember my mother was very curious. But that may be...I don't whether that's an interest in...you know, scandal, or something. And I remember she said to me as well, she said, 'you must know that your nana would probably have known her', like my father's mother. And that's something that has bothered me a lot, like you know, she would have sort of disappeared into the ether at some point. But in any event, I sent the letter...

MOR *And what did it say?*

JB What?

MOR *The letter?*

JB The letter, it was just a one line. I wrote it, I typed it up on the computer for my Dad and it just sort of said that he – I, John Barrett, [pseudonym] am related to this woman in this way and I give my consent for any of her records to be released. She...it was presented to me as a data protection question. Now I didn't bother to look up the relevant law, or...but this was the

question. So I then got back, and I remember I emailed scans of them to you, I got a one page...now one page suggests...now, this is not closely covered text. A very brief form printed from a computer database. And this gave a Bridget Barrett, who apparently was the only Bridget Barrett in the records. And a date of admission, which was in February of 1928. And it also gave the name which she had been given for the purposes of her life in the laundry, which was Hannah [pseudonym of Bridget's house name]. And as far as I remember, that was it. And the thing that struck me about it was that the age of admission that was given was 40, and it also said that her father was still alive at this point.

MOR *Yeah, in 1928..*

JB In 1928. And by 1928, some but not all of her siblings would have emigrated. I know that her eldest sister would have emigrated. Her very eldest sister, the oldest in the family, had left for Chicago by that point. Two of her brothers had certainly left for Chicago by that point. And I know, although again this isn't something that either my father knows much about or speaks much about, that many, that most of the brothers in the family would have been involved in the Civil War, on the anti-treaty side. And I don't know whether, that may have been, you know there were a lot of things going on in the family in the 20s. I don't know whether her mother was still alive, I don't know what the context might have been. But it struck me as wrong that her age was given as 40 because she was born in 1900 – according to the census, the 1901 and 1911 census. And this was now 1928 so she should only have been 28, according to the record. Which was the age that I was, at the time. And I just thought this was...and it struck me as terribly important that, you know, if this was the only record of her in the world, which I'm not sure I believe – it strikes me as very odd that this would be the case – but that that record should be accurate. Or otherwise, I just had the wrong woman, you know? So I emailed Sr Roche again and said that – oh, I had forgotten something, sorry – along with the one page print-out, there was also a letter from the Good Shepherd order which responded to my questions. And with most of the questions it said they just didn't know the answer. They didn't know what work she had done, they assumed her death would have been certified, they didn't know why she had been admitted. And in particular – this was what bothered me – Sr Roche said, 'note that she was 40 on admission'. So they said, 'we don't know whether she would have had a child or whether she would have been brought from a Mother and Baby Home, but note that she was 40 upon admission.' And so I started to think, well you know, why would a woman aged 40 be admitted to a Magdalene Laundry, and was there a suggestion...I mean,

one thing that struck me was that perhaps she had a disability of some kind and that, you know, there was nobody who could care for her at home. Though she did have a sister living at home, and you would assume socially that's who would have taken the responsibility if that had been the case. But I knew from the census in 1911 that when she was 11 years old she could read and write, which suggested that, you know, this probably wasn't the right...

MOR *And you definitely have the right Bridget Barrett on the census...*

JB Oh yeah.

MOR *Because you have all the family and everything...*

JB Well because the dates all match up, I have all the family, I have...you know, it's definitely my grandfather, it's definitely all his siblings, all the names match and everything. The place, the townland – [location removed] is absolutely right. And so, yeah, so I got the death certificate and the death certificate said that she had died in 1973 aged 73. So, which was right. So she was the right age to have been born in the year that I thought she was born in, in 1901. And she died in the Good Shepherd Laundry, so it's definitely the right woman, and the age in the database is incorrect. Now, I don't know how that might have happened, how that mistake was made, but in one of her emails Sr Maura said then – and this bothered me hugely – that she had checked with one of the older members of the order, I assume they're in the retirement home, who remembered Bridget Barrett and who said that she remembered her as a very old woman. Now if that kind of information is available, albeit from very elderly nuns, you know, presumably, hopefully that should be recorded. That shouldn't only be in the gift of – whatever her good intentions might be – of somebody like Sr Maura Roche. There's no reason why there should be only one gatekeeper of that information. But also I kind of felt that, if they were dealing with it in good faith – and I hadn't been combative at all, now I mean I'm a very privileged position that I have no need to be combative – you know, why couldn't that elderly nun answer my question about what kind of work she did? And Sr Roche had also said in a telephone conversation...in our first telephone conversation I think, that I should remember that even when she as a young nun was working in those kinds of environments, that the women who were there who might want to talk to them and tell them their stories, the Magdalene women, would be discouraged from doing so, would be advised to approach a superior nun. So, what was my point with that? Sorry, I've mixed up two points. The first was that, you know,

this elderly nun who remembers her as a very very old woman – you know, if I'm a young person, how am I to tell, I might underestimate somebody's age by 20 years or over-estimate it by 20 years, especially if they've been doing, you know, how many years of slog and slavery? You know, over 40 years of hard work by the time she died. And the second point is kind of, clearly there is some information still available within the religious communities, and it would be useful to have that. I mean there are very, very few people who had access to this woman's sort of working life, her daily life. The other thing I should say is that on the death certificate...the death certificate gives a cause of death, so she had a history of hypertension and then had...I mean it's very difficult to read, but she had a heart condition. The word 'cardial' is in there somewhere. And it lists her occupation as 'retired domestic', which I think is very unfortunate, you know? I mean, because presumably the word 'domestic' is like 'labourer' on death certificates – it's a kind of umbrella term which could mean anything and which doesn't capture precisely the kind of work that I'm assuming she would have done. And I would also assume that if, let's say that she was a housekeeper, and a paid housekeeper rather than an inmate of an institution, I would assume that the order would be reasonably free with that information. So I just, it does bother...now on the other hand, I know that we are lucky to some extent that a death certificate was given, and that you know, that she died in...or at least her death is registered in...a hospital. So I know that this was...that...that sort of final moment of engagement with the State wasn't always present, and that it's good that that record is there. So, I mean, it is also at the back of my mind that there might just be one kind of slim chance that it is the wrong person. I did make further...

MOR *You mean that you've got the wrong entry register, or that the death certificate's wrong?*

JB Or that there might be another woman of exactly the same age, because Bridget Barrett is...

MOR *In the same Magdalene Laundry...*

JB Yeah, I'm kind of leaving open...not kind of...hope, but I could be wrong. I don't think I am, though. That point is relevant though, because I did make kind of one final effort to put together the pieces, and I knew that there was a local historian in [location removed] who had the national school registers of [location removed] National School, which is where they would have gone to school. And I asked him if they were available, and I won't name him, but he...they weren't or they weren't for this year, I think. But he did send me a long email about

how I must realise that this was – yeah, I mean local historian is not the same as academic historian maybe, although people have different degrees of ethics – but he said I must realise this was a different time. And then he told me story about how...like in this email...about how the local priest at some point from [location removed] had gone to the Magdalene Laundry to celebrate Mass, and a women had asked to come back and see her family, and that the family had been reluctant and had sort of kept the curtains and the doors closed when she was visiting in case the neighbours would see, and were terribly hostile to her arrival back. And I don't know why he was telling me this story, he didn't identify the woman. I do know that [location removed], I mean [location removed] was the site of an industrial school, so perhaps that area was especially conservative or something. And it would have been the local parish priest who brought her to the laundry. Or at least this is my mother's theory, she says of course, you know my great-grandparents wouldn't have had a car. You know, they wouldn't have been the kind of people who would have had that transport for themselves, so presumably... So that's sort of a little bit of a rambling account of it...

MOR *No, no, it's great. So did you...I mean, have you gone back to the nuns with the death certificate and said, 'why is the age wrong?'*

JB I did send an email back and said, well, I had confirmed but we haven't had any further correspondence about it. I mean, they wouldn't...the impression that Sr Roche gave to me is that they wouldn't, she's looking back at one line. One line entries and if a mistake was made at the point of entry, or even at the point of transferring I assume written records to a database, I don't know where that database is, or what it is, or why it exists – but there may, it may just be a clerical error.

MOR *And have you asked...I mean, I know you said you didn't get in any way confrontational with them, did you ask them, did you name any other kinds of records that they might want to give you? Medical records, pension records?*

JB I don't recall but I can certainly check for you precisely what questions I asked. But I don't think I specifically asked for pension records or medical records. I could be wrong though, I'd just have to...I don't have the notes with me. I'll just have to double check. Because I've kept the emails, obviously.

MOR *And do you feel that you could go back to them with further questions like that, or would there be a point?*

JB I mean, I don't know what the point would be. I would rather, sort of, wait and see what shape...you know, what the JFM campaign results are, and then kind of see after that. But no, I mean, the only thing I can think of in terms of medical records is that on the death certificate it says, '20 years hypertension certified'. So perhaps that suggests that there was a...you know...a course of medical treatment. But I don't know, I don't know. I would rather know precisely what kinds of records were kept, and then ask.

MOR *Yeah, I was going to say, what questions are left in your mind, having just got the one line?*

JB Well one of the things they said, or Sr Roche says in her letter that accompanied the database entry, is she says that – one of the questions I had asked was whether there was a record of visitors, whether she had received any visitors – and Sr Roche says, well, the fact that she was buried in the mass grave suggests that there was very limited family contact, because some families would have brought their sister or aunt, whatever's, body home for burial. And my family didn't do that in 1973. And I don't know why. One thing that I did notice when I was kind of looking at family history more generally that summer, my...her brother, her father's uncle, died in a construction accident in Chicago in 1946. And I found the death notice from the local Chicago paper. And in the death notice it gives his name, you know, Brian Barrett, [pseudonym] and the date of death. And then it says who his parents were, so it names his parents, Thomas and Margaret [pseudonyms]. And then it says, 'survived by his siblings,' and it lists all of his siblings, and Bridget's name is there, in 1946, almost 20 years after she had gone into the laundry. So I don't know whether that means there was still contact, I don't know whether that means maybe her relatives in the United States weren't aware at the time of what, or her siblings in the United States weren't aware at the time of what had happened. I know that her eldest sister did come home on a visit when my father was young, that would have been in the 60s or 70s. I don't know what her understanding of what had happened was. I don't think, or my father doesn't remember, certainly, her going on a visit to the laundry when she came home. My father doesn't remember his father having any contact, though he does talk about his father sitting down, like, on an annual or six-monthly basis, to write a long letter of news to his siblings in Chicago. So there was...and you know...and my father's cousins have at various points in our childhood kind of come on visits from the United States and the UK. So, I

don't know. I mean, I don't know what the story is, and I don't know whether they attempted to visit her, whether they attempted to take her out, what the circumstances were of, within the family what the circumstances were of her going in. And my father doesn't appear to know either.

MOR *And did you say that it seemed then from the letter that the nuns do have records of visits, or this was just they were surmising?*

JB I think she was kind of surmising, that the pattern would have been but I don't know what the procedure would have been for notifying families, or what the procedure would have been if you wanted to claim a body. I mean, I wonder what would happen if you decided you wanted to claim a body now.

MOR *That's an interesting thought.*

JB Isn't it? I mean isn't it, though? The only reason I'm thinking of that is that Ned Kelly's body was finally released to his family in Australia however many weeks ago, for reburial in his family plot. But I think that would be a very interesting question. But, yeah, I don't know. I don't know. I mean, it is sort of intriguing, because you don't know what disputes there would be in a family or why things might have happened. But, the point I wanted to make was this doesn't seem to be a family where nobody ever spoke, where let's say my father's family, his parents, didn't speak to anybody. You know, there were, even across, sort of, quite big distances, there were ordinary connections and visits and correspondence.

MOR *And your Dad grew up knowing that she was in a Magdalene Laundry?*

JB I don't know when he found out, or when he...I think it was just something that he knew, or that he had heard.

MOR *Do you know if he was told when she died?*

JB He doesn't, he didn't say anything about a funeral or anything like that. So when she died, let's see, my father was born in 1954, he would have been almost 20 when she died. He didn't say anything about a funeral or a service. His father would still have been alive. His sister would still

have been alive you know, his entire family would still have been there. His uncle and aunt, who were still living in the family home, would still have been alive. So he doesn't remember and again, he does have memories of other family funerals. So...

MOR *Yeah, and would he have been able to give you that date, 1973? When you found her date of death on the death certificate, would your Dad have known that already?*

JB I didn't ask that question. I had, because it says...it says 1973 on the headstone, and I don't know where those dates came from, or how those records were obtained...

MOR *Well that's another question...*

JB So that's how the match, sort of...and I thought it was interesting as well that, you know, if the name Hannah is the name on the database, Bridget is the name on death certificate and Bridget is the name on the gravestone, and I just thought that was interesting, the kind of switching of names between purposes.

MOR *Yeah. But they have Bridget...they have her as Bridget on the database as well as Hannah?*

JB On the database it says Bridget Hannah and then...yeah.

MOR *And going back to that database, all you have is her name on entry, the name and the house...*

JB It says the name, it says, 'father still living', it gives the name of the townland which is [location removed] it gives the date of admission in February 1928. It gives the age, it says 40 on admission. Then it says Hannah within – I'd have to...again, I've given you a copy, I'm just sort of reciting that from memory.

MOR *Of course. And it doesn't say mode of entry?*

JB No. No it doesn't.

MOR *Yeah. Have you done any searches apart from for the death certificate, have you searched with the State at all for any kind of records, whether they would be pension records, or anything else?*

JB No. No I haven't. I...again...I just sort of let it lie for a while. I'm not ruling out that I would later. I mean, one of the things I might consider doing is asking my father's cousins whether they remember...whether they remember anything. But that's a project for another time, I think.

MOR *Yeah. And do you think your Dad is still to be tapped for any more information or do you think he's given you everything...*

JB You'd never know. You never know. I don't really know how he feels about it. But I do...I mean it does make me kind of wonder, I mean I'm sure there are lots of...you know there are lots of...I mean for instance the two stories I remember my mother telling me on that day when this sort of came out as well was, first, she remembers – perhaps my mother was unusually innocent – but she remembers going on a trip to London, she was a primary school teacher, and a colleague of hers had arranged accommodation for them in some sort of Catholic organisation's hostel, or something. And she remembers looking around at breakfast and realising that all of the other people in the room were of the same age as herself and her colleague, but they were the only two women in the room who weren't pregnant. And so she was aware of that, and she was aware of girls in her class in school who never, sort of, came back. But she also told me that, and this would have been in the 70s, her brother when he was a teenager got a local girl pregnant, and she went to England, and the baby didn't come back. And that this was something which only one of my, he had told, or no the girl had told only one of my aunts. And this was something my mother had kind of never spoken about, but that these things were just kind of buried within...you know, and on the one hand, we're...I assume, as we function to the degree that any family of that kind of background. And both my parents come from, kind of, small rural farming backgrounds, originally. But on the other hand, you do have to wonder how those kinds of episodes echo down through generations. So I mean, what does it mean for, sort of, the men in the family's understanding of, like, what their daughters should be allowed to do if you kind of have in the back of your mind, well, my sister or my aunt, whatever, got pregnant and she was sent into the Magdalene Laundry, or she was whatever. I mean, you have to kind of wonder, whatever. And when that kind of experience is replicated in family after family, after family, after family, how does it continue to produce itself? Even, you know, there

was that story in the news a while ago about this school in Tipperary who wouldn't admit a girl because she was pregnant...

MOR *And said they'd do it again if they had to...*

JB And said they would do it again if they had to, and that this was, you know, they were defending the faith, and they were defending the other girls in the school from her, sort of, the bad example of her promiscuity. I mean, it's impossible to understand that without realising that this is kind of a soft control version of what was a much...kind of, stronger institutionalised system. And I think maybe that's one of the things that I think should come out of this campaign, is sort of creating an opportunity for people to think about, you know, your language in international human rights law is the idea of kind of an ongoing violation, but an ongoing societal violation. That this isn't something that happened *then*, that we remedy and then it's over. This is something that has echoes and resonances down through families, down through society, in ways that we might even struggle to articulate or struggle to find the facts to explain in our own, consciously.

MOR *When your Dad was telling you, was he reflecting, did you feel, on what it actually meant?*

JB No. No, I don't. But he's not a very...you know, I think most Irish men of his generation aren't very reflective, you know. And he's not...you know, my Dad has a secondary school education, he's not a big thinker. But he wasn't...kind of, very...he wasn't hugely emotional about it either, in terms of hostility or grief, or whatever. But I think...I mean the thing is you have to – not you have to, we don't have to do anything – but I suppose his father was, you know, a much older man, and there were lots of things that, you know, the men commemorated the 1916 rising in 1966, those guys with their medals on their jacket pockets, there were lots of things they didn't talk about. You know? So he wouldn't have as far as I know, a terribly clear picture of his family, or how it worked.

MOR *How does he feel about the fact that you're going after the records now?*

JB He...I mean he didn't object, he signed the letter of consent for me. I don't think he would be terribly keen on a fuss. You know, I don't think he would necessarily be terribly keen on this interview or the idea that something was written down somewhere. But I don't know, you never

know if you pressed him what he might do. My sister who is two years younger than me, would tend to say that this is rubbish and that I'm making a fuss. Or this is kind of drama. And I think there may very well be people of our generation who – and I think it's a very interesting thing to think about – who really don't want to be associated with any of that kind of thing. Or who – and I think maybe we all do – people of our generation conceive of ourselves as making a break, especially from that horribly dysfunctional way of dealing with your family's problems, you know, shoving it as far away as you possibly can. You know, I don't think she's terribly excited by this information. My brother isn't terribly excited by the information.

MOR *And so, I just have a few last questions, I know we don't have all the time in the world. Finding out about this story, and just more about the Magdalene Laundries in general, but in particular your personal connection, what impact if any has that had on your own, your sense of your own identity?*

JB It is something in terms of my academic work, my professional work that I want to explore more. I mean, at the time that I...my work is kind of on how religious and state legal orders coexist. And I think that, you know, the Magdalene Laundries throws up all those sorts of questions about, you know, especially when you think about things like the police, the criminal justice system's use of the laundries, even things like the contracts for laundering of army uniforms or prison laundry, or all of the other state contracts that they got. I mean, in some ways, from a sort of dispassionate perspective, this is a really interesting case study, and this is something that I'd like write about in the future. But when I'm writing about it, you know, part of me kind of thinks, I mean, you have to be very, very careful about how you kind of relate to this woman who I didn't know. And who, even if she hadn't gone into the laundry, I would have the same kind of maybe dim collection of anecdotes that I have about my other grandaunts. These are people who died before I was born or when I was very, very small, but I think I would take a small bit of pleasure in kind of writing about this thing as a way of remembering people like her who, of whom there is very little record. But that's not kind of...and I think any kind of academic work of this kind, it's not like – and lots of other people have done this too – it's not about sort of triumph, it's just about thinking about...is not about transformation and joy in how much better things are now. It's about thinking about what we might discover. The other thing I kind of want to...I think if, you know, if I have children or if my siblings have children, that they would know that this thing happened, I think that's important. And also that none of us would ever call our daughter Hannah, I mean that's really important! It sounds really stupid, but that's definitely

off the agenda. But I also think as well, I mean, she's not somebody who I would have had – even if she hadn't been in the laundry – I wouldn't have had any major connection with her, you know. But she would still have had a life, right? And she would still have lived in the community, or she would have gone to England, or she would have joined her sister in Chicago. She would still have been part of the household, she would have kept her other sister company, she might have looked after her parents. She would have been part of that community. She might have married, my father might have cousins. And all of that just disappeared into thin air. And I think that's a pity. I think that's a loss. And I think that when we...that could be one of the ways to explain to people the harm that the Magdalenes did, that it deprived us in a way that we can't even articulate of family and community life, and of...you know, of women who – maybe some of them if they were particularly disobedient – you know, would have made valuable contributions to their community in that way, by not taking the church too seriously. I mean, one way to look at what happened is that it was the church's way of eliminating an awful lot of women who would have said no, who were dissenting from a particular model of social control. That might seem too romantic or too strong for lots of people, but...

MOR *Yeah it is romantic. It's a nice way of thinking, they were strong women, and they were actually a threat...*

JB Yeah, and from a feminist perspective, one way of articulating that loss would be to say the church and our grandfathers robbed us, robbed rural women in particular, of our stronger aunts, you know? And of women who might have been very – and we know this from the women who left – who became very strong mothers and raised good children, and became serious members of their community. So that deprivation, that's kind of something that has happened which doesn't boil down to money. You know, I think the government are emphasising this idea of reparation, but the kind of violence that's done is not a financial violence only. It robbed entire communities and entire families.

MOR *Yeah. And so on that note then, what do you think the State should do now?*

JB Well I support everything that JFM is demanding, but I think in terms of women like my grandaunt who didn't survive the process, who died very many years ago, I think that the oral history element of the project is really important. I think that it's important to look towards the inter-generational and social aspects of what happened. I think it's important that this is

something that's taught in schools. I mean, my memory of growing up in the 90s, certainly in my parish, was that there were a number of attempts to sort of reclaim particular figures in history, so I remember for instance one of the burial plots where unbaptised babies had been buried was marked and celebrated, and there was all this focus on the famine and so on. And I think, even outside of the educational system, sort of some official and regular remembering and telling of these stories is important.

MOR *As to the records?*

JB As to the records, I mean, I think that they should be made available to the greatest extent possible compatible with the right to privacy of women who are still alive. I mean, the researcher in me wants things digitised and available online – I recognise that that's not necessarily compatible with everybody's interests, but for me the experience of going through a gatekeeper who I felt, rightly or wrongly, had a vested interest in not allowing me to access even the very limited amount of information that was directly relevant to my family, that was irritating for me. I can imagine that if I was trying to locate – as many people are – a mother, or a grandmother, or locate information which is, you know, absolutely central to my sense of identity, that would have been traumatic for me, if my interest had been stronger. I mean, you know, and obviously there are connections to the unregulated state of adoption law at the time that make that sort of thing difficult, but I mean the other thing is when you think about, you know, we invest, in this country we've invested an awful lot of money into tribunals of inquiry – if we could have a record of half the detail in relation to dealings with Magdalene Laundries that we have in relation to, you know, where Charlie Haughey bought his shirts and so on, that would be terribly valuable. That would be terribly valuable because the influence on Irish society and how it's governed of these kinds of scandals is just as great as, you know, the corruption of parliamentarians in the 70s and 80s, you know?

MOR *Do you see value in an apology from the State and from the church?*

JB That's...I mean, that's not something which is directly relevant to me, but I can see how it would be valuable to the women who are still alive and to their families. I think it's just...there are so few women, the harm is so great. I really don't see what's wrong with saying sorry if that's what they want.

MOR *Yeah. What's your personal opinion on the situation now and the length of time the women have been waiting – those who are still alive?*

JB I think the notion of delay is always a really tricky one, because delay is something that always...the State never minds delaying reparations but the State holds the passage of time against these women, I think is one thing. I mean if you were going to be extremely cynical, you would assume that the State is waiting for the women to die. And that is just a reproduction of...I mean that is a reproduction of what previous versions of the State did, holding women at bay, refusing to acknowledge their existence properly, treating them as invisible, waiting for them to shut up again, putting them back where they belong. I think it's just reproducing the same problem again. And I also think just from...I know for instance that survivors of symphysiotomy have chosen to go the civil litigation route because they don't have trust in the tribunals and the inquiries which have been established already, and that's understandable. But I think, not from a proper legal perspective but from a general critical perspective on how the legal system operates, I think that requiring women to go through the burden of civil litigation, even with adjustments to statutes of, to limitation periods, it's just too great a burden. It's just too great a burden.

MOR *And the financial burden is still huge in Ireland as well.*

JB Yes, sure. And I think as well, we have to think more creatively about how justice is done. You know, we could very easily take the narrative that this was a different time, this is something we don't understand, this is something we haven't come to grips with. Well then maybe it is something that requires an alternative form of justice, which can't be encapsulated in tort law, criminal law. And now, of course that will be an experiment and of course will be the sort of thing that legal scholars like me will look at in ten years and say 'it was wrong' in the following however many ways. But you have to be willing to take the risk.

MOR *Did you grow up in a religious family, with religious education?*

JB Not the most religious, I mean for instance I know that there would have been neighbours of ours who knelt down with their children to say the rosary in the evening – we didn't. When there was a Corpus Christi parade, we had to borrow a picture of Jesus to put in the front window. *(Laughs)* My father had to put up...had to buy a new holy water font, or the first holy water font,

when we would have the Station Mass at home, you know that kind of thing. So my parents weren't...it wasn't part of the rhythm of our everyday lives to that extent. But of course we went to Catholic primary schools, we picked up the sense of that morality around women, even though it wasn't directly imposed on us to the same extent. I suppose my Dad probably was quite strict, but not with any explicit reference to Catholic morality. But we would have picked up, and I'm not sure how or where, I can't remember any direct statements, but we would have picked up the idea that sex before marriage was a terrible, terrible thing, or if you got pregnant, you know, a terrible, terrible thing. But at the same time, we were growing up you know in the shadow of things like the X Case and the divorce referendum, and so there was, you know, our parents were in their 30s as Ireland was having this, kind of, moment. So I think, I wouldn't say that we were brought up in a strictly religious family, and certainly my parents have said things about the church, you know, they have expressed all kinds of opinions which are by no means radical but would dissent from, you know, Catholic social teaching. So no, not a particularly religious family, and I don't know, I can't really...I mean my grandmother, my father's mother who I knew, was a religious woman, but I would sort of say more in terms of her own personal faith rather than imposing social teaching on us in any way. I don't, but I can't speak for my father's experience, she may have just sort of...have thawed. So I'm kind of familiar with the practice but I wouldn't say that it was the major driving force in my life, although I do know that how – even women of my generation in Ireland – how we were raised was not ideal. You know, there was, the influence of the church was too strong. But for instance where I went to school I wasn't taught by nuns, for instance. I went to a comprehensive school and I stopped attending Mass when I was 18. So there wasn't any kind of restriction on my freedom in that sense. But we all made Communion and Confirmation.

MOR *And I'll end with a very general question then. Since this is your area of academic expertise, I mean, then kind of following on from that is...what is your perspective on the interaction between State and religion, State and church?*

JB State and religion is a very broad question. But what's interesting is that when...I think the best way to understand what was happening in Ireland was that there were effectively two legal systems in operation, sometimes with overlapping areas of jurisdiction. I mean, the State's official line is that it did not give equivalent jurisdiction to Canon Law – Canon Law was not part of the legal system in the way that Irish law is, or even to the extent that the State recognises the foreign law of another jurisdiction. But the State allowed the church and various – I mean

the 'church' is too big a word – but allowed religious agents so much control over particular domains, not just within the walls of institutions but of course, you know – we know this – within medical and educational institutions as well as with penal institutions like the Magdalene Laundries. The state allowed church figures so much control that there were effectively plural jurisdictions operating in the country. And I think what's most interesting is to look at the ways in which influential Catholic laymen – usually men, not always – influential Catholic laymen and religious leaders explained how they were interacting with the State system. I mean this is something which came up in the Cloyne Report, this is something which came up in Dublin. It seems to me that certain figures within the church felt that they were...I don't know, that they were...that the State was theirs to command in terms of pursuing a particular social order, or that they would pursue that social order in alternative domains other than those officially recognised by the State. And the State turned a blind eye, and the State allowed a zone of autonomy to build up. And I think if the State and if Enda Kenny [Taoiseach] really is serious about, sort of, paring back that pluralism to something which is manageable, something which is reflective of individual human rights, we need to start exploring those zones where the church still feels that it has the right to decide matters for itself without due regard to the civil law. I mean, that's a promise that the Taoiseach made in very general terms.

MOR *And the Magdalene Laundries as a case study – you were saying earlier that it's an interesting case study in your area – what lessons can be learned from it as a case study?*

JB What lessons can be learned from it? I think one is about...sort of, there's a certain falseness to our reliance on choice. When we...the narrative that the State is sort of setting out is one about individual families choosing to send their daughters to these places, or even, laughably, women choosing voluntarily to come in themselves to this kind of life . Choice does not work in that way. Choice takes place within a set of constructs and within a particular context. The State closed down options, either by its manner of regulating church institutions or by its failure or refusal to regulate. I think that's one. I think the second lesson is, I think the second lesson actually is that legal agency, or your impact on how the world turns out, isn't just a matter of your individual actions. So if you look at somebody like Bridget Barrett, in terms of her or any of the women who died in the Magdalene Laundries, they left a very, very small footprint legally. They're barely visible. But it is possible for the law to reach back now and flesh out their experience in its terms and give that legal meaning. And I suppose that the final thing is, to think about this problem as a problem of sovereignty. What the State has to do is reclaim

jurisdiction over the lives of those women. And reclaim it in a way which is creative. And that means a number of things. It means giving up, sort of, assumptions that only existing actions and existing forms of claim can address what happened to these women. It might be necessary to set up alternative means of reparation. And also maybe we need to think a little bit more about the international human rights system, because I think often when we try to articulate what happened to these women we rely on international law and the State says, 'well that's not our law'. You know, 'that's something that we can pick and choose from.' I think maybe we need to think carefully about our domestic understanding of human rights and where they stretch, and how far they can go. I read yesterday that Ireland doesn't really have a sense of individual rights, that we've always thought about community responsibility before individual dignity, and maybe this is one of the classic examples of what that looks like when we let it continue for a hundred odd years. I think the final thing is to think about social deviance and crime. I mean, you know, it is evident from what happened to women in the Magdalene Laundries that there was the official criminal law and then there was a very strange grey zone of 'female misbehaviour' where you could effectively be – which varied from locale to locale, which was a matter of moral luck, and which could lead to your spending, you know, 40 years in penal servitude. I'm not sure what the penalties are for murder, but I'm sure it would be interesting to read those in con...to read that in context. So I think the proof of the pudding will be not in whether we have, you know, a nice monument – and of course if we do have a nice monument we know it won't be on O'Connell Street, right? Even though there's still a little statue of Jesus in a box on O'Connell Street – maybe we could replace Jesus in a box with a Magdalene woman – but the proof of the pudding will be in how we think about social change and women's agency and the law.

MOR *Great, well thanks so much for taking the time to give us the interview.*

JB It's probably a bit rambling, sorry...

MOR *No, it's really fascinating to hear your thoughts...*

[Interview ends]



Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History

A project funded by the



Reference Code:	MAGOHP/77/ANON
Records donated by:	Johanna Barrett
Pseudonym?	Yes
Status:	Relative
Records donated:	Correspondence with Good Shepherd order (one series of emails and one letter from Good Shepherd sisters); grandaunt's laundry record.
Access Conditions:	Records are freely available to the public. Immediate release of records. Interviewee to be identified in 60 years.
Conditions Governing Reproduction:	Records can be reproduced, however the citation below must be used at all times.

Notes on Redaction Process

Notes on Redaction Process

- Named individuals have been assigned pseudonyms
- Locations have been redacted
- Email addresses have been redacted

List of Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Status/Relationship to Interviewee
Johanna Barrett	Interviewee
Bridget Barrett	Interviewee's grandaunt who was in laundry
Sr Maura Roche	Third Party Religious

To cite this transcript:

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Email Correspondence between Johanna Barrett and Good Shepherd Sisters

From: Johanna Barrett [mailto:[Johanna Barrett email address removed]]
Sent: 01 July 2011 15:15
To: [Religious order email address removed]
Subject: Magdalene Laundry Limerick

To Whom it May Concern,

I believe that my great-aunt, Bridget Barrett, was in a Magdalene Laundry run by your order in Limerick City. I would be obliged if you could send me the information which you have on file about her.

In particular, I would be grateful if you could tell me the following:

- What name was she given in the laundry?
- What were her responsibilities in the laundry?
- What were the circumstances of her admission to the laundry? When was she admitted and under whose instructions? In particular, if she was transferred from a mother and baby home, which home was she transferred from and what became of the child?
- Did she leave the laundry at any point? Where did she go?
- Did she receive visitors in the laundry? Who were they?
- What was her cause of death?
- Was her death registered?

The details are as follows:

- Bridget Barrett, [location removed] (daughter of [names removed]).
- Born approx. 1900
- Died [date removed], 1973 in the care of your order at Limerick.

I would be grateful if you could give this email your immediate attention.

Johanna Barrett.

From: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed] [[Sr Maura Roche email address removed]]
Sent: 05 July 2011 11:09
To: Johanna Barrett
Subject: Re: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

Dear Johanna

I received your email requesting information about your grand aunt. Before forwarding records I need confirmation that you are the next of kin as Data Protection does not permit records to be given otherwise.

If you email your phone No. I will give you a ring , or my No. is [telephone number removed].

Looking forward to hearing from you

Sr Maura Roche

From: "Johanna Barrett" <[Johanna Barrett email address removed]>
To: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed]
Sent: Tuesday, 5 July, 2011 12:01:53 PM
Subject: RE: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

Dear Sr. Roche,

Perhaps you could give me some guidance on what information you would require to prove the relationship.

Best,

Johanna Barrett.

From: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed] [[Sr Maura Roche email address removed]]
Sent: 05 July 2011 14:06
To: Johanna Barrett
Subject: Re: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

Dear Johanna

If your grandfather is alive he would be next of kin, if not your father but to clarify the issue may I suggest you email me your number and I will ring you back to avoid any misunderstanding.

Sr. Maura

From: "Johanna Barrett" <[Johanna Barrett email address removed]>
To: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed]
Sent: Thursday, 21 July, 2011 11:48:55 AM
Subject: RE: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

Dear Sr. Roche,

Apologies for the delay. I am attaching a pdf file of a letter from my father, confirming that he is Bridget Barrett's next-of-kin and that you have his permission to release your records of her time with the Good Shepherds to me.

I trust that you now have all of the necessary information to begin your search.

Please let me know if you need a postal address to send information to.

Johanna.

From: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed] [[Sr Maura Roche email address removed]]
Sent: 22 July 2011 11:40
To: Johanna Barrett
Subject: Re: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

Johanna

Thank you for your email with attached letter of consent from your father. It would be best to have a postal address, even though the records are very basic.

Blessings

Sr. Brid.

From: "Johanna Barrett" <[Johanna Barrett email address removed]>
To: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed]
Sent: Wednesday, 27 July, 2011 2:11:03 PM
Subject: RE: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

Dear Sr. Roche,

Thank you so much for the records of Bridget Barrett, which arrived by post today.

I have one question. Is it possible that the record in your database is inaccurate?

The Bridget Barrett we are looking for is in the 1901 census below, and since she is recorded as aged 1 in 1901, she could not have been aged 40 in 1928. She would have been closer to my age.

[Hyperlink removed]

Many thanks,

Johanna.

From: [Sr Maura Roche email address removed] [[Sr Maura Roche email address removed]]
Sent: 01 August 2011 14:18
To: Johanna Barrett
Subject: Re: REQUEST for information re Magdalene Laundry Limerick

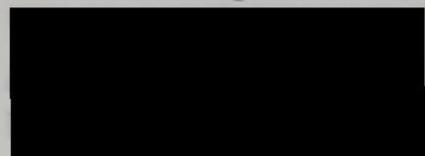
Dear Johanna

I refer to your last email and note the discrepancy of age you referred to. I have checked the Register of Admissions lest there was an error and found the Database to be correct. The townland corresponds and we have no other admission by the name of Barrett that would correspond to your details. I spoke with one of our Sisters, who is in her late eighties, who recalls Bridget and her memory is she was very elderly when she died. I regret I do not have any other information that could clarify the story unless there were other Barretts in the locality.

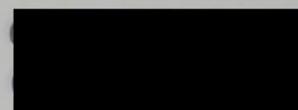
Blessings

Sr Maura Roche

Good Shepherd Sisters,



Tel:



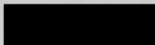
Fax:

22nd July 2011

Dear



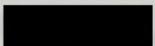
I enclose the record your requested which as I said is very basic. At that time the confidentiality of each person's story was highly respected and therefore was not recorded on admission to St. Mary's Home as it was called. The laundry dept. was where the women & Sisters worked alongside of each other for their maintenance and upkeep. The only person who knew the "story" was the Sr. in Charge, hence I am unable to answer most of your questions except the following.:

- What name was she given :  (for reasons of confidentiality)
- What were her responsibilities in the laundry? **Not known**
- What were the circumstances of her admission? **As you will see  was recommended by her parish priest, perhaps her family went for his advice ... why? we have no idea. We have no reason to believe she had given birth or was in a previous home. We simply do not know. Note she was 40 years old on admission.**
- Did she leave at any point? Where did she go? **It would appear she remained with us for the remainder of her life. If she had wanted to leave she would have been helped to do so.**
- Did she receive visitors? Who were they?,obviously I would have no idea regarding visits etc. The fact  is buried in the Grave of our past residents in Mt. St. Laurence's suggests there was little family contact as some of our residents would have been taken home to be buried in family graves.-

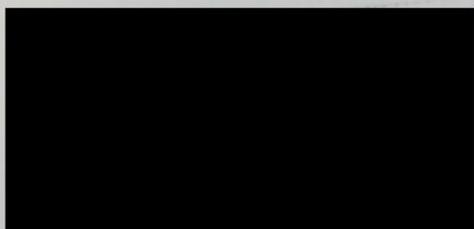
What was her cause of death?

- Was her death registered?

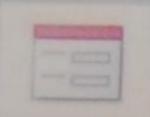
All deaths were registered so I am sure a Death Cert. could be obtained from the The Register of Births, in St. Camillus' Hospital, Shelbourne Road, Limerick which would give the cause of her death.

, hoping these details are of some help, regretfully I have no further details.

Yours Sincerely



AR



ID NAME: [REDACTED]

Surname: [REDACTED]

First Name: [REDACTED]

Class Name: [REDACTED]

Age on Admission: 40

DOB: [REDACTED]

Recommended by: sent by Rev. [REDACTED] PP, [REDACTED]

Redress B:

Marital Status:

Institution: 3

Institutional Status:

Day of Adm: 11

Month of Adm: 02

Year of Adm: 1928

Family: father living

Address 1: [REDACTED]

Address 2: Co. [REDACTED]

Address 3: Ireland

Re-admission:

Previous Institutions:

Day of Dep or Death: [REDACTED]

Month of Dep or Death: [REDACTED]

Year of Dep or Death: 1973

Reason: Deceased

Destination: R.I.P.

Additional Information:

Remarks: