



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



<b>Reference Code:</b>	MAGOHP/69
<b>Oral History of:</b>	Catherine Whelan
<b>Pseudonym?</b>	No
<b>Status:</b>	Survivor
<b>Keywords:</b>	Good Shepherd Magdalene Laundry, New Ross, Co Wexford; food deprivation; haircutting; beatings; solitary confinement with no food, water or toilet facilities; humiliation; lesbian relationships between older women in laundry; consecrated Magdalenes (auxiliaries) as part of regime; Residential Institutions Redress Board (RIRB); Magdalene <i>ex gratia</i> scheme; difficulties with solicitors at RIRB; religiosity; healthcare for Magdalene survivors.
<b>Date of Interview:</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> May 2015
<b>Transcript:</b>	45 pages
<b>Number/Format of Audio Files:</b>	One .m4a file
<b>Interviewer:</b>	Prof James Smith
<b>Records/Papers included:</b>	Yes
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## Notes Regarding Interviewee

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- The organisation JFM Research (formerly Justice for Magdalenes) credits this survivor as the inspiration for the launch of the organisation's political campaign. See pages 44-45 of the attached transcript, and Prof James Smith's op-ed article, available here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/rite-reason-death-of-an-inspirational-magdalene-survivor-1.2589767>
- Although the interviewee consented to her identity being revealed after her death, out of respect for the privacy of her family around the time of her death, Prof Smith did not reveal the interviewee's identity in the op-ed article referenced above.

## Notes on Redaction and Transcription Process

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Interviewee Initials: JS

Interviewer Initials: CW

### 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
- Certain locations have been removed to protect the interviewee's privacy
- Dates have been accurately transcribed
- Interviewee's exact date of birth has been removed to protect the privacy of third parties

### List of Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Status/Relationship to Interviewee
Thomas/Tom	Interviewee's brother
John	Interviewee's brother
Josie/Josephine	Interviewee's sister
Theresa	Interviewee's aunt
Judy/Judith	Interviewee's grandaunt
Edith	Interviewee's grandaunt
Jenny O'Connor	Interviewee's mother
Norma	Third party Magdalene
Mother Ignatius	Third party religious
Sister Veronica	Third party religious
Dr Bolton	Third party clergy
Rose Boyle	Interviewee's neighbour
Bernadette	Person who advocated on interviewee's behalf
Louise	Interviewee's friend

### Basic Data from Interview

Name/Pseudonym	Catherine Whelan
When Born	1935

<b>Born outside marriage?</b>	No
<b>Raised by</b>	Family until fourteen
<b>Education</b>	Primary
<b>Order</b>	Good Shepherd
<b>Laundry</b>	New Ross
<b>From</b>	1949
<b>To</b>	1953
<b>Duration of stay</b>	Almost four years
<b>Age on entry</b>	Fourteen
<b>Entered Via</b>	Family (her father)
<b>House Name/No</b>	Yes
<b>Haircutting/punishment?</b>	Yes: food deprivation; being forced to kneel in front of others for complaining; haircutting; beatings; solitary confinement with no food, water or toilet facilities; humiliation.
<b>Circumstances of Departure</b>	Was unexpectedly sent to a position in a hospital.
<b>Emigrated?</b>	Yes
<b>Physical ailments?</b>	Yes
<b>Of Note</b>	Interviewee is now deceased

[Interview begins]

JS *Okay. So Catherine, I need you to first of all confirm your name.*

CW My name is Catherine – or Kathleen, as I was known in Ireland – Whelan, W-H-E-L-A-N.

JS *And Kathleen, I want you to confirm that I have gone through the Consent Form with you and that you signed the consent willingly.*

CW Yes you have, you've done everything and I've signed, yes.

JS *Perfect, okay. So Catherine I'm going to ask questions and try...just to keep on track with the questions and...and then we'll see where that takes us.*

CW Hmm.

JS *So Catherine, tell me when and where were you born?*

CW I was born in...in...on the [identifying information removed] 1935 in a small town in County Wexford named [location removed].

JS *Very good. And Catherine, who raised you?*

CW My mother ra...and father raised me until I was about six and a half, and that's when she died in childbirth.

JS *She died in childbirth. And did you have any brothers or sisters?*

CW Yes I had two brothers; Tom the eldest, Thomas, and then John [pseudonyms] my youngest brother.

JS *And then a sister...younger s...*

CW And then my sister Josie, Josephine [pseudonym].

JS *Okay.*

CW And then there's two children in the meanwhile...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...stillborn, yes.

JS *Okay. And where did you go to school Kathl...Catherine?*

CW I went to a...a...s...I don't know what you'd call it, a small school in [location removed] for a while until we got a j...until the house was built in Wexford.

JS *Right.*

CW My grandmother had won the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes and she gave the money to my father for a house...

JS *Right.*

CW ...so he rebuilt an old one right next door to Aunt Theresa [pseudonym] in Wexford, hmm.

JS *Right. And the school was...it was...*

CW A...a...

JS *...national school?*

CW ...i...it was a c...convent, Sisters of Mercy...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...up in S...out in...in St John's Road, I didn't go to Summerhill.

JS *Okay.*

CW Yeah.

JS *And in your childhood, obviously you were a young child, but prior to going to the Magdalene Laundry had you ever heard of such a place or such a name?*

CW No, no.

JS *Very good. So Ca...Catherine, can you explain...you mentioned that your m...your mother passed away when you were very young, and...is that when you went to the Magdalene Laundry?*

CW No, no, no. When my mother passed away my father, with the help of Aunt Theresa, took care of us...

JS *(Coughs)*

CW ...and then he had some argument with aunt Theresa about something, that she was spending his money, I don't know the details, but anyway he took us and he brought my brothers to...to Grand aunt Judy [pseudonym], that's *his* aunt, up on [location removed] Road in [location removed] and then I went to his first cous...Josie and I went to his first cousin out in [location removed] which is outside [location removed] and we were with her for about nine months until my father married...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...then we went back to Wexford. But in the interim though, Grand aunt Edith [pseudonym] came from England to look after us.

JS *Okay.*

CW She was a very elderly lady and she got a stroke and she passed away, so that's what he did with us when he had no one to look after us.

JS *Okay. So then when did you first go to the Magdalene institution, and...*

CW I went at the...

JS *...and which Magdalene?*

CW ...at the age...at the age of fourteen...

JS *Okay.*

CW He took me on his bicycle, between riding and walking, to New Ross...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...but he didn't tell me where I was going...

JS *So you didn't...*

CW ...he said I was going for a better education.

JS *Okay, so you had no idea?*

CW No...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...but I realised after I settled in...

JS *Right.*

CW ...that I was being sort of thrown away...what shall I say – abandoned...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...that's...that was the word I used, although I never heard the word.

JS *Right.*

CW I wasn't very well educated, God just gave me a good mind and I was...I'd read anything, newspapers, anything, but...and I retained it.

JS *Right.*

CW But it's a terrible feeling when you come to...and then...I was *thrilled* to get away from home, *believe* me, I...I...I was just thrilled, because we left a horrible place actually in...now in my...as I'm eighty...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...I realise the devil reigned, and my step-mother never touched us, but she...she touched us with her tongue...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...and we were nothing only Jenny O'Connor's [pseudonym for interviewee's mother] bastards.

JS *Right.*

CW And then of course my father would get wild, she burned *anything* that had to do with my mother; all our p...baby pictures, all our pictures, his wedding pictures from...from my mother, i...it was terrible. She was from a very bad home too, she was from...from an alcoholic home.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.



JS *But your father also was strict and pun...*

CW Very domineering, very strict

JS *...and punished you?*

CW Yeah but I w...we were all to blame...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and of course...i...i...if you...if your hair was out of place for a minute, that c...set him off on another tangent, yeah...

JS *Hmm. So...*

CW ...yeah.

JS *...do you feel...h...why do you feel then you...you ended up in the Magdalene, the reason being that y...y...it was convenient...*

CW Well I don't know, I think it was convenient for him, I think he did not know how to handle a young developing lady at fourteen, you know, that...he...I think as I'm older now and understand things I think he was thinking about the boys and how he could do this or that.

JS *Right.*

CW But I think too he got me away from step-mother because i...if I did do a house cleaning job for a neighbour she took the money from me right away for her cigarettes.

JS *Right.*

CW That's all she cared about.

JS *And when you were in New Ross...and that's the Good Shepherd...*

CW Yes.

JS *...the Good Shepherd...*

CW Yeah.

JS *...were the nuns...how many nuns about were...were there do you remember, just roughly?*

CW There were all nuns...on our side there was at least 10.

JS *Right, so there would have been the Magdalene part and then there was an Industrial School...*

CW ...the Industrial School over at the other side...

JS *Right.*

CW ...we called it the orphanage.

JS *Right.*

CW And I didn't even know...all I knew was that I was in New Ross, I didn't know the name of the place even...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and that they were...

JS *So this is 1949 you ended up going to the Magdalene?*

CW Yes, yeah.

JS *Okay, and you were there for how many years?*

CW Th...nearly...got out in fift...I've forgotten...

JS *I think it's four years, 1953.*

CW Yeah, I think it was, yeah, yeah.

JS *Yeah.*

CW Not quite the four years...

JS *Right.*

CW ...I got out in May I...the end of May I think.

JS *Right.*

CW And you see, now I realise that was the beginning of the...of them phasing out these places...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and they were letting certain ones go.

JS *Yeah. In those four years did you ever try to leave, or did you ever try to run away...*

CW *Oh no...*

JS *...or escape?*

CW ...it was...there was one or two that ran away but then, they were savvy...

JS *Right.*

CW ...they had been...one in particular that ran away, she had been a prostitute in London and she must have somehow or other got word out, I don't know how. But so...I...we used to go and walk out in the back...we called it the back field, every Sunday we would go all around, it was a huge meadow and down at the bottom of it there was a road and...it was a country road and a few cars went by so I think what *she* did was, she went down the back road, we're walking nonchalant and she was with a group, the next thing (*laughs*) I think she was over the ditch – I didn't see her – and got into this car...

JS *Uh huh. And about...*

CW ...so...so the nuns didn't miss her at all...

JS *Right.*

CW ...until late at night.

JS *Sure. And in your memory about how many women were in the Magdalene part?*

CW With us...

JS *Roughly.*

CW ...there was rough...wait 'til I see...we were in...we were in little groups called circles, 10 each...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and I think there was at least 60 of us...

JS *Right, and...*

CW ...it was considered the smallest one.

JS *Right. And the age range of the women, of...your memory?*

CW The...I remember one young girl, she couldn't have been any more than twelve. And then they would come f...certain ones would come from the orphanage, and they were fourteen just like me.

JS *Right.*

CW And then there was real old women there and they were in their...Norma [pseudonym] for instance, she was in her nineties.

JS *Wow.*

CW Then there was a lot of mentally retarded women...

JS *Right.*

CW ...at least six or seven.

JS *Right. And were all the women the same, or were there, within the pop...within the Magdalene women, were there Magd...were there consecrated women?*

CW Yes there was called black...black girls, they were a group of like...Legion of Mary...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and they were...con...you would call them today, consecrated women...

JS *Right, okay and c...*

CW ...consecrated virgins, if you ...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...or wha...or p...actually they were called penitents...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and they were probably...they never were prostitutes, but the way M...Mother Mary Euphr...Euphrasian [Euphrasia]<sup>1</sup> and her brother John Eudes, Saint John Eudes<sup>2</sup> set up the order was that it was right after the French Revolution and they only took the girls that were prostituting themselves, and John Eudes took the boys because there wasn't even a crust of bread to be found...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and of course the wealthy who kept these girls employed were no longer there...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and so they had nothing at all. So then these...these were wealthy...from wealthy families – John Eudes and Mother Mary Euphrasia – and they had escaped to either Italy or France and when they came back, they set up...

JS *They founded the order.*

CW ...yes, they found...they were very holy people...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...they founded the order.

JS *Can I ask, are you doing okay Catherine, do you need a break?*

CW I'm doing...no, no, I'm fine.

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<sup>1</sup> Founder of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, also known as the Good Shepherd Sisters. Please see the testimony of Good Shepherd Sister Ethna McDermott at the Northern Ireland Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry for details on the recent merger of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity and the Good Shepherd Sisters: [https://www.hiainquiry.org/sites/hiainquiry/files/media-files/M12%20D194%20Sr%20Ethna%20Docs\\_Red%20OPT.pdf](https://www.hiainquiry.org/sites/hiainquiry/files/media-files/M12%20D194%20Sr%20Ethna%20Docs_Red%20OPT.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Founder of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity.

JS *You're fine. Good, okay. So, a couple more specifics about your life in New Ross. Were you ever sick in your four years, or what happened if a Magdalene woman got sick, was there a doctor, or was there medicine?*

CW No, you went to the infirmary and the nun looked after you.

JS *Right.*

CW Unless you were rea...the...the time they were doing in the fifties...early fifties, they were doin...they discovered the tuberculos...the cure for tuberculosis...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...and everyone had to be tested...

JS *Right.*

CW ...so they were testing us too...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and it was about 10 or 15 who had severe tuberculosis...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and out of those 15, I *believe* 12 died. It was only scuttlebutt around, gossip...

JS *Right.*

CW ...around, but...but these things travel.

JS *Sure.*

CW And...

JS *So they would have went out to a sanatorium?*

CW Oh they went to Enniscorthy, yes.

JS *Right.*

CW And then the dentist would come in and...and do your teeth, but only if you had something wrong.

JS *Right, okay.*

CW He removed a rotten tooth for me, because you see I didn't have enough...growing up...enough food, that my rear molars were just shells...

JS *Right.*

CW ...there was no calcium at all in 'so he just cracked the top...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and...and...and filed it down a bit. But years later and I here in America it started to erupt...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and when the dentist took the x-rays of course, he found the root.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Okay. And when you were in the Magdalene and you were working, we'll talk ...*

CW Yeah.



JS ...about that in a second, could you complain, was there a way...

CW Oh no, no...

JS ...to complain?

CW ...no, no. As a matter of fact, if you complained at all, you were written in a...in a thing called the Black Book, because you see, there was complete silence, you couldn't talk. But if you went down, complained or anything, you were written in the book, and in the book it was written what you were complaining about. And the nun who was in charge sitting up on her predue [chair] looking at all the workers, she would then write that in the book and then when Mother Ignatius [pseudonym] the headmistress, came on on Sunday we all had to sit around in a ring, in a half circle, she was up on – we called it the throne – it was just a high seat, so she could see us all, and she would read from the Black Book that you spoke on Thursday last and you kept on talking even though Sister So-and-So or Mother So-and-So had told you not to. And then i...if you complained about anything she would then say, 'now we have three complaints about you, that you broke silence, now here we have a complaint about you that you *complained*. Come out here...' and you had to get up out of your seat, go into the middle of the room and kneel down in front of her and *apologise* for causing the nun...what shall we say...discom...she didn't say...*disobedience*. And for your *penance*, 'you're...you're going to do without your supper today,' usually on Sunday.

JS Which...what...

CW Or...

JS ...would be a day you might get something extra on Sunday?

CW Yes. And...or you're not going to see the picture, meaning the movie...

JS Right.

CW ...that was coming on. And so...I...one time I broke down and said, 'do you know, you're all bloody liars, I never said such and such a thing, I never complained,' so I ranted and raved in my Irish blood, I was *very* angry because I was angry at my father for putting me there, I was angry that I wasn't getting an education, I was exhausted from the work. And she had them hold...the...the black sisters hold me down and she came with her scissor and she cut off all my hair. Then another time I asked her could I go to bed early because I wasn't feeling good and she slapped me on the face and she said – my name there was Columba – and she said, 'Columba, you're always lying'. And I said, 'I'm not lying, I really am sick Mother'. And so she gave me another slap in the face and I got her and pulled off her veil and started to fight her. So she got the black girls again to rescue her and she put me next door to the stairs in a little room called the Harmonium Room, there was nothing in it only a harmonium, which was like an organ.

JS *No windows?*

CW N...there was a window, a bay window. But there was no toilet, there was no bed to lie on, there was no pillow – *there was nothing!* Just a bare room. And I was locked in that for fort...twenty-f...forty-eight hours, for two full days. Well of course I needed to...

JS *Sure.*

CW ...nature took its call and I...I was doubled up in cramps because I was trying to hold it, and I had to do it in the corner of the room. Well I got another beating up for doing that. Well I said, '*I couldn't get out, Mother, the windows were locked*'. And she says, 'you have more excuses than I know, you...you're causing the biggest trouble here, no wonder your f...' she said this in front of everyone, '*no wonder your father threw you out and brought us to h...to us, to give us trouble*'.

JS *So a lot of humiliation?*

CW Ah *terrible*. I mean, it's alright to say it to me, to my face in front of no one else, but when it's said to you in front of everyone else, th...although they're not supposed to talk, the gossip gets around...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and...these...I'm only telling you...these are some of the humiliations I remember.

JS *Right.*

CW Yes.

JS *So you're...h...were there nuns who were better than others...or how would you characterise y...*

CW I only can remember one nun, Mother Veronica [pseudonym] she was a sweetie, and she was so good to us, but she'd always say, 'now don't...' she'd give you an apple or an orange from underneath her habit, or a candy, a sweet as we called it, or a...or a biscuit, and she'd say, 'now you're not to let anyone know I gave you that'.

JS *Right.*

CW She was the...you know, even as a young inexperienced person, you knew the ones that had a vocation and you knew the ones that were just put in there because they wanted someone in the family a nun.

JS *Yeah.*

CW Yeah.

JS *And what about your relationships with the other women, were you... could you have a friendship or were there girls who...*

CW No...

JS *...you were closer to?*

CW ...well you couldn't really because they watched – and I realise now what they were watching for – they were watching for acts of homosexuality I believe, which was rampant there.

JS *Was rampant there?*

CW Yeah.

JS *Between the girls and between the women?*

CW Between some of the older women.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Seeking comfort?*

CW Yeah, and they...the nuns protected us younger women and then some of the older...women who were devout people, they watched us.

JS *Okay, so you felt protected at some level from that?*

CW Well I wasn't aware of it...

JS *No.*

CW ...that they were protecting us from that...

JS *Right.*

CW ...but like the toilets were...we had a...toilets all in a row in the Toilet Room and if the...they always had a black girl standing there...watch, or a nun to make...

JS *Okay, so the consecrated nuns are...the consecrated Magdalenes, the black girls...*

CW Yeah...

JS *...they were helping the nuns...*

CW *...in among us...*

JS *...yeah.*

CW *...yeah, and they were in with us.*

JS *Okay.*

CW *Yeah.*

JS *Did you ever have any visitors, did any family ever come to visit you?*

CW *No one ever came to visit me.*

JS *No.*

CW *No.*

JS *Any letters?*

CW *Only from Aunt Theresa.*

JS *Right.*

CW *My father never wrote.*

JS *Right.*

CW *Not even a Christmas card or a birthday card, nothing.*

JS *And so you never got any gifts or any money from home...*

CW No.

JS *...or anything...*

CW No.

JS *...like that?*

CW Aunt Theresa, they were poor, like everyone else in Ireland in the fifties...forty-nine...fifties, and she sent me – for Christmas and my birthday together – she sent me a half a crown, which was a lot of money in those days...

JS *Did you get...*

CW ...to get myself toothpaste...

JS *Right.*

CW ...because you wouldn't get toothpaste...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...if you had no money. No, you were given a big slab of scrubbing soap for your face.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah. But you got a toothbrush, but you didn't get any toothpaste.

JS *And were you able to keep the half crown to buy the toothpaste or did they...*

CW Oh they kept it in account for you.

JS *Right.*

CW So they opened a shop once a week on a Saturday and you could go in and purchase...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...whatever, 'til your half crown was gone.

JS *And there was no...oh that's interesting, I haven't heard about a shop within the Magdalene, could you...could you...*

CW No, it was in the office...

JS *Oh.*

CW ...a little small thing, you know.

JS *Okay. And could you...would they give you any credit for working in the Magdalene?*

CW *Oh no, no...*

JS *No.*

CW *...no, no.*

JS *So you had to have been sent money...*

CW *Oh yeah...*

JS *...in order to...*

CW *...to be sent money...*

JS *...okay, that's interesting...*

CW *Yeah.*

JS *...that's good to know. So do you...can you describe the living conditions, you know, your...*

CW The living conditions were alright, they...the dor...we had to clean the dorms every Saturday, we lived in a dormitory. The sheets were changed every other week. The only thing I thought could have improved and that was the women with underwear, we were only given underwear...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...every other week...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and of course due to natural causes, the odour wasn't very pleasant...

JS *No.*

CW ...and sometimes you had to rinse them out at night and if they dried...I used to put mine next to me so that my body would dry out the underwear, a certain part of it, and...so that's how you lived...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...best you could.

JS *Right.*

CW *Yeah.*

JS *What about food?*

CW Oh food was very sparing. For breakfast we got one slice of white bread with a t...about a tablespoonful of drippings, whatever they were, on the side, and a cup of tea. You could have milk and you could have some sugar but you were only allowed one teaspoonful of sugar. And



that was breakfast. And on Mother's feast day or the Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene, Christmas, Easter, you got a hardboiled egg and you got an orange. They were the only luxuries.

JS *So you never got fruit...*

CW And...

JS *...or green vegetables otherwise?*

CW We got green vegetables, we got loads of cabbage...

JS *Right.*

CW ...potatoes, and sometimes the meat was gone because it had come over from the convent...

JS *Right.*

CW ...where it was all cooked and I think it had gone off, and they couldn't give it to the nuns, that's my excuse, I wasn't told that...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...I was only deducting.

JS *Right.*

CW And...

JS *And would you...would you say that you were hungry often or it was just that the food...*

CW See I don't remember being hungry...

JS *Right.*

CW ...but...

JS *But the food wasn't great?*

CW But...I'll tell you I remember eating hungrily for breakfast.

JS *Hmm. Just to go back to clothes for a second, could you wear anything you liked or was there...*

CW Oh no there was a uniform.

JS *There was a uniform.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Do you want to describe...*

CW Thick knit stockings...

JS *Right.*

CW ...beige. And you got shoes – somebody else's leftover shoes – if they were your...if they were your size, whether they were wide or narrow (*laughs*) as long as they were your size...

JS *Right.*

CW ...you wore 'em.

JS *Right.*

CW And there was a...big rough slips, and they were all handmade out of very rough calico, yeah. No bras.

JS *Right.*

CW Heh!

JS No.

CW Heh!

JS *What work...what about the work, what types of work did you do when you were there?*

CW At...when I went in first I was on the other side of the mangle. They would put the hot sh...the...the wet sheets that came out of the washing machine, they would put them all in a big tub from the laundry and bring 'em up to the mangles and then they would put them through twice and the first time they put 'em through, one at...one end and one at the other and you took 'em out at the beginning and you had to fold them like so...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...back, accordion pleated. And then each one you c...weren't allowed to put two or three together, but each one you had to pick up, not to wrinkle it, pick it up and carry it on your arms like so.

JS *Still hot?*

CW *Boiling!* Just after coming off...and the steam...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...and so *of course* I was burned and had...and had sores...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...and the nun says, 'oh don't worry they'll bust and then they'll crust over, and doing the laundry, your arms will get used to it'.

JS *Wow.*

CW Yeah.

JS *At fourteen.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Yeah. And any...besides the mangle, did you do any other types of work or...?*

CW Yeah, I fed the mangle later on but I still wasn't fifteen yet.

JS *Right.*

CW And I had to stand on a stool 'cause I couldn't reach the darned thing!

JS *Okay.*

CW But then what did I do, oh I ironed shirts, I worked on the press, which is like an iron that comes down...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...like a lid, yeah...

JS *Folds over.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Yeah.*

CW And you did most of the shirt on that but then you passed it on to another girl who did the refined work around the collar and the neck and the sleeves.

JS *Right.*

CW Well I did the ma...the...the...press and then later on...you moved around all the jobs.

JS *Right.*

CW Then another time I wasn't feeling good and Sist...Mother Veronica gave me a job at the back of the laundry, to fold all the clothes with another girl who wasn't feeling good, there was some sort of flu going around.

JS *Right.*

CW But after that [I] had to move to manual labour...

JS *Right.*

CW ...the big stuff, yeah.

JS *Do you remember anything about the laundry...was it...y...now...what I'm asking is was it coming in from local families around the area...*

CW Oh yes...

JS *...was it coming from factories, hotels?*

CW ...it was coming from hotels, like the White's Hotel, no, not Wexford, the New Ross Hotel I remember, it was coming in from parts of Kilkenny...

JS *Uh huh.*

CW ...like Graiguenamanagh...

JS *Right.*

CW ...they came in, all New Ross...the New Ross Hotel, bed and breakfast places, the hospitals.

JS *Right.*

CW And of course when they came in from the hospital, they didn't sluice off all the faeces and blood and so on...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...so someone had to go a special room and with a...a very heavy spray, spray those off before being thrown into the laundry.

JS *Okay.*

CW *Yeah.*

JS *So they would have been chemical sprays or...*

CW *No...*

JS *...did...*

CW *...just plain water...*

JS *Oh right, okay.*

CW *...to get the...whatever...*

JS *Right.*

CW *...was on the sheets...*

JS *Oh.*

CW *...before they were put into the bleach water.*

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.

JS *And any...any other – so you mentioned hospitals – schools...boarding school laundry?*

CW Yes the girls' boarding schools...

JS *Right.*

CW ...and private people themselves, yeah.

JS *So private households?*

CW Yes.

JS *And there was va...laundry vans...men who delivered it back to them?*

CW No, there was only one van...

JS *One van.*

CW ...that would go around to each place each week...

JS *Right, okay.*

CW ...but we were kept busy.

JS *Yeah, because I know New Ross was one of the smaller...*

CW Oh yes, yeah...

JS *...Magdalene institutions...*

CW ...yeah. And then, if there was a...a feast day or...like Christmas or Easter, there was the hol...hol...we needed to go to church for...the Stations [Stations of the Cross], where you needed to go to church for...anything, you...

JS *Holy day of obligation?*

CW ...yes, you would be...the day before, you had to stay up and finish that laundry even if it was 8, 9, 10, 11 at night...

JS *The work had to get done.*

CW ...so as that it would be all done and packed, so as that the laundry man could pick it up the...the following da...not on the holiday but the next day.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.

JS *In your memory of New Ross did...obviously the laundry produced income for the nuns...*

CW Yeah.

JS *...was there any other forms of income, was there any lacemaking for sale or...*

CW No...

JS *...farm work...*

CW ...there was no lace...

JS *Right.*

CW ...making where I was, no.



JS *Okay.*

CW Some of the older women did embroidery...

JS *Right.*

CW ...there was a lot of knitting among the girls, and I'm not sure where that all went, I'm sure it was done for donations. I'm only assuming.

JS *Yeah, if you don't know, that's fine, don't worry.*

CW And I'm sure the sweaters were sold...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...for income, I'm not sure. I never saw a government person there. But I saw plenty of clergy.

JS *Right.*

CW They...the...the...the b...the bishop from the Diocese of [location removed] Dr Bolton [pseuonym] I remember coming around one time.

JS *Right.*

CW And then there was local people from New Ross, like dentists, and I remember the pharmacist that was...used to cover the...the...the nuns, they'd come. Like if there was a wedding in the family they'd come show us the wedding.

JS *Hmm.*

CW Well I think now I remem...I think that was the...the most horrible lack of taste, in my book. Here we were, *poverty stricken*, stuck in this laundry, no one...no family and here they are coming in to show us the luxury *they* were living in...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...on their movies...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and a wedding and...big chauffeured limousines and all the...the pastries they were eating and the big cake and so on, so forth.

JS *The...they'd show you homemade movies?*

CW Yeah, they were all homemade...

JS *Right.*

CW ...yeah.

JS *That's interesting.*

CW So I thought that was...now I do, but...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...at the time it was just a distraction...

JS *A diversion.*

CW ...for us to look at.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Do you want to talk a little bit about how you left the Magdalene?*

CW Yeah, I remember...

JS *You're still doing okay Catherine?*

CW I'm doing okay, yeah.

JS *Right.*

CW I remember she come up to me and I had been embroidering a beautiful cloth and she wanted it early and she came up and she said to me – this was the Mother Mistress, Mother Ignatius – and she came up to me, I was nervous of her, she came up and said, 'isn't that done yet?' and I said, 'no Mother, I haven't got time to do it, and my work take...takes time, and I can't do it while I'm at my lunch hour. And so...because I'm reading during the lunch hour, to the girls...used to sit up on a high stool and read and then while their lunch is finished I'm eating mine and so I've no time'. She says, 'well come with me'. Well I thought I was in for a big penance and she took me up through the church and she s...this door goes into the church, this door goes to the...to the nunnery.

JS *Hmm.*

CW And so she says, 'leave your embroidery there'. And I left it on the...on the window sill, a stone window sill, and she took me through, and into a room and she says, 'y...you're leaving today, we've got a position for you'. But then they couldn't find shoes to fit me because I had short broad feet and so (*laughs*) they brought me down, they put old shoes on me, that I was wearing, and they brought me down to the...before I took the – was it the train, I think, yeah the train – from New Ross to Dublin. She brought me into the shoe...shoe people and they fitted my feet and I got these awful brogans, they were like men's shoes, but they fit...

JS *Right, that's great.*

CW ...and that's all that mattered.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah. And they sent me to the...as a domestic to the orthopaedic hospital in Clontarf.

JS *Why do you think you got out of the Magdalene? Because obviously...*

CW No they were emptying it out...

JS *You think so.*

CW ...little by little.

JS *Yeah.*

CW I think they were...they knew that they were going to close because you see, the laun...homemade washing machines were coming in...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and dryers, and – for the Irish it was...never mind the dryers, they would dry 'em outside – but the washing machines were coming in and what happened was the big hotels started to get in their own machines...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and then...

JS *And again, New Ross was the smallest...*

CW ...the smallest...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and...

JS *And it closed the first I think...*

CW ...and it was the first to close, yeah.

JS *Yeah.*

CW And the building I believe, I don't know about it, it was Aunt Theresa who told me, they sold it to the Sisters of Mercy...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...as a boarding school, because they had one in New Ross...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...so that was a larger building for them.

JS *Right. Almost finished. So, do you want to talk a little about...I mean, I know you went to Clontarf, then you went to London, and then you came to Boston, and we won't go into your life because the interviews are about the Magdalene primarily. Do you want to say a little bit about how you feel about having been in the Magdalene and what it has meant for you...*

CW Well...

JS *...and for your life?*

CW ...I'll be very honest with you, if the Magdalenes had not been there, my father I think would...such a horrible man, would have thrown us out and we would have been on the street. So for that we are grateful that there was a place for us, not to be thrown on the street. And the nuns had no control over our...at least my...the way I was raised, the family I came from...but I *thought*...I honestly thought, after being treated the way I was at home, beatings, shouting, swearing, denial of food, that *at least* the nuns would be kind.

JS *Yeah.*

CW *They were not, they were the c...some of the...one or two were the cruellest nuns you ever want to meet.*

JS *Right.*

CW *There were ins...not alone, mostly verbally and (pause) and you felt alone in the world, and I'll be honest with you, it turned you against God, instead of them bringing you to God because you feel if God doesn't...i...if my father doesn't want me, and...and...well God doesn't want me either...*

JS *Hmm.*

CW *...those were small-minded thinkings.*

JS *Sure. Let me...let me ask, you mentioned much earlier in the interview that there was the other part of New Ross which was the Industrial School, what you called the orphanage, did you think or do you think looking back, about why you weren't sent there versus the Magdalene?*

CW *No, I never had...could...I never could equate it...*

JS *Hmm.*

CW *But I know now that I didn't...couldn't go to the Industrial School because the government only paid for the...those girls until they were fourteen.*

JS *Sixteen.*

CW *No, not in those days...*

JS *Hmm.*

CW *...sixteen didn't come until later.*

JS *Okay, well I...hmm...okay.*

CW *Anyway...*

JS *Yeah.*

CW *...you know better...*

JS *Yeah.*

CW *...than me, but that's what I thought.*

JS *Right. Have you ever...have you any inclination...or did you ever have an inclination to speak to the Good Shepherds about your time in New Ross?*

CW *No, no.*

JS *No.*

CW *And I...I was so scared of 'em, I was terrified that they would bring me back! (Laughs)*

JS *Sure. I bet, 'cause I ask because I know that you found your faith again...*

CW *Yeah.*

JS *...and you're devoutly Catholic and...and...you know, that's...I...I...I just wanted to ask that. Unlike the other women who participated in the Oral History Project, which was done in the main two years ago...*

CW *Yes.*

JS *...we're now two years further on, and I'd be interested...so these are questions that are not on the list and I won't...I know I'm taxing you so I don't want to go on too long, but could you talk a*

*little bit about how you feel now that there's been an apology, and can you talk about what the...the compensation package has meant to you and to your life here in America?*

CW Well first of all when I filed...I filed when they were looking for industrial girls [Residential Institutions Redress Board] so I thought...*industrial to me* meant factory...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...but I didn't realise that the Industrial School and the orphanage were intertwined.

JS *Yeah.*

CW So of course they didn't cover the...

JS *The Magdalene...*

CW ...Magdalenes.

JS *So that's the Residential Redress...*

CW Yes.

JS *...fund...*

CW Yes.

JS *...the Residential Institutions...*

CW Yes.

JS *...Redress Board.*

CW And so then I thought...the lawyer sent me a letter and he said I was sacked, he wasn't going to look after me anymore, because I didn't come from the industrial part and he couldn't do anything



for me. And then...I worked on the Monday for my neighbour Rose Boyle [pseudonym] and she always got the *Boston Globe*, and right there on the front there was these two men and they were looking for women in the Boston area who had worked in the Magdalene Laundries. Well I didn't know even *then* that they were called Magdalenes. I knew that we were supposed to be *repentant women* so I suppose nobody has proved that Ma...Saint Mary Magdalene was a prostitute but it said in the Bible that she was one of the worst sinners, well in tho...her day the worst sinner ever was the prostitute, so they assume that she was a prostitute so hence the Magdalene. So I said, 'oh boy, I better get in touch with these people and see what there is'. So I went into a hotel in...in...

JS *Boston.*

CW ...Boston, but it turns out that there was no...not for the Magdalenes, even though they had said it in the *Globe*. Well then I was reading...after he sacked me I happened to be...I used to get the...

JS *By which you mean he wouldn't represent you?*

CW ...he wouldn't represent me and that if...if I did get anything, that he wanted his cut, yeah...

JS *For services rendered?*

CW ...for services rendered. So anyway... (*Laughs*)

JS *That upset you, I can see!*

CW So anyway...

JS *Rightly so.*

CW ...I'd rather go to jail than him get a penny! (*Laughs*)

JS *There you go Catherine!*

CW So anyway he...he...then I saw...I'm a reader as you know, and I was reading in...reading in...what was the books out [advertisements for books] in the *Saint Anthony's Messenger* [Catholic publication] and the books at the back, there was three, and the Magdalenes was one of them, and it was by you<sup>3</sup> and it told you what the book was about. *And I said, 'that's about me'.* So that was a Sunday, so on Monday right away, I called up *Saint Anthony's Messenger*. Who answered only an Irish nun! (*Laughs*)

JS (*Laughs*)

[Sound of papers rustling]

CW And so I said I would like a couple...two books, so I was going to send one to Louise [pseudonym] and so she said, 'I'm...I'm noticing an accent,' I said, 'yes, I'm from Ireland,' and she said, 'well are you...are you acquainted with these?' I said, 'yes, Sister, I was one of 'em and I just want to know what this writer is writing about, to see if he has the same version as I have, and I would love to talk to him and straighten him out (*laughs*) if there's anything wrong'. So anyway that's how I met you.

JS *That's how you met me.*

CW Yeah.

JS *But...and...*

CW And you introduced me to Bernadette [pseudonym].

JS *And I introduced to you to Bernadette, and obviously we worked on the pension. So...but...and which is such an important thing in my life and I so...it meant to much to me to get to know you. But what...what about the apology, so skipping over what we've done together and...and what the JFM [Justice for Magdalenes] campaign...*

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, J. M. (2007) *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

CW Well I wasn't going to sue the nuns...

JS *No.*

CW ...for...even...even though they were horrible to me and that, because I was a tough kid, full of *tremendous* anger. And I was...I didn't swear or anything but I would blow my stack [at] any minute and I was...there was no *therapy* there...

JS *Hmm.*

CW ...no one to find out wh...wh...what happened to you...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...no education, just work, work, and what I wanted was money for my work.

JS *Yeah. For your pay.*

CW It was hard work, I broke my back at...without a dime, that's all I wanted, I didn't want any law suits against the nuns...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...or anything.

JS *You wanted the compensation.*

CW Although I could...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...sue them for...what shall I say, pain and suffering...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...*mental* pain and suffering. So...but I didn't, I didn't feel it was just, but I did feel it was just to...to sue for a loss of wages. And I did consult a dear priest friend of mine who was very wise and he told me that I was not committing a sin by going after money for which I was owed.

JS *Absolutely.*

CW Yeah.

JS *So you received your compensation?*

CW Yes, and that pension is a godsend, because now I can say to my dear friend Louise, 'let's go out to lunch'. Not *big* things, I can pay for my hair, I don't get it set or anything, I wash it myself and my hairdresser, she just cuts it for me. And go and get my nails done maybe every week and...

JS *Look at them, nice and shiny today for your big journey! Lovely!*

CW *(Laughs)* So anyway...

JS *Those small things...*

CW Small things.

JS *...that make your life...*

CW And putting the money away, not spending it, I'm very frugal now...

JS *Right.*

CW ...not when I was working.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah. And I'm able to give now to my church and give to my charities – not a lot...

JS *But you give.*

CW ...even if it's only \$5, there's an awful lot of people in want you know, yeah.

JS *You went back to Ireland last year?*

CW Yes, I'm going again this year.

JS *Excellent.*

CW Because my...

JS *So that money has helped you to be able do that?*

CW Oh God yes, yes. And to go first class because I couldn't, because on account of my bad back, I wouldn't be able to sit up that length of time...

JS *And that's...*

CW ...not since...

JS *...meant a lot to you, to go home?*

CW Yes. And my niece, my sister's youngest girl is going to...to Africa and I...she's going to be there for four years and so I want to see her before she goes because I don't know if I'll be alive when she comes back.

JS *Right.*

CW Yeah.

JS *Last question. You still haven't got the healthcare.<sup>4</sup> Why is the healthcare important to you? Last question.*

CW Well I...it's...it [would] save me paying out of my pocket, what *Medicare* doesn't pay.

JS *Yeah. And you've a...you've a number of medical conditions that that would really help you with?*

CW Oh yes, yes.

JS *Yeah, okay.*

CW I go...I go and I have injections for my back...

JS *Yeah.*

CW ...and the injections are so painful that now I have to have a sedation and ox...and...and they put me under...

JS *Okay.*

CW ...because my back has gone so bad. I used to take it without, but no, not now. And then...I'm going now for alternative medicine, which is acupuncture.

JS *Good.*

CW And honestly that...I didn't believe it, I really thought it was hocus pocus, but this is a Chinese doctor and she's beautiful, very gentle and...and I couldn't believe my sinuses were cleared, I'm sleeping a little better, although the pain in my back wakes me up. And...she's not touching my back right now because I just got the injections...

JS *Yeah.*

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<sup>4</sup> Administrative arrangement around healthcare for women overseas under the Magdalene *ex gratia* scheme.

CW ...three weeks ago.

JS *But it gives you relief when she has worked...*

CW It certainly gives me relief.

JS *Okay.*

CW Yes.

JS *Well we'll finish there Catherine...*

CW Right.

JS *...thank you for your time. And I'll just say, so it's on the record, that you called me on October the 28<sup>th</sup> 2008, that was the day of the phone call.*

CW Well I don't remember.

JS *Well I remember. And that's when we at JFM made the decision to kind of...it was part of helping us to make a decision to go for the [political] campaign.<sup>5</sup>*

CW Yeah.

JS *So you have played such an instrumental role, indirectly, in helping bring about support and relief and acknowledgment and compensation for all of the women who have benefited from the campaign.*

CW Thank you so much.

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<sup>5</sup> See note on cover sheet regarding interviewee's influence on the JFM campaign

JS     *So without you, I want you to know that, without you, and without you lifting the phone and having the wherewithal to lift the phone and ask for help and say, 'what can we do about this?' you know, it was so important. So, realise it's...it's...your story is so much more than your story.*

CW     Yes.

JS     *Okay, we'll finish there.*

CW     Yeah.

[Interview ends]

[Irrelevant conversation about stopping recording devices removed]