

## **‘THE MISSING MAGDALENS’: THE ABC RESURRECTS A ‘HIDDEN STORY’ DISCREDITED MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO**

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The first quarter of the twenty-first century has seen several exposés of institutional practices that occurred during the twentieth century. Institutions once considered sacrosanct, including the Catholic Church, have not escaped critical examination. Harsh judgments have often been made. While care must be taken in applying contemporary mores to actions done in the past, certain standards are universal and objective and we should not shrink from applying them when looking at the past. The exposure and condemnation of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and its cover up is an example of the appropriate application of those standards.

Nevertheless, a just assessment of practices of the past can only be made with knowledge of the facts and circumstances that shaped those practices. Many cases are not as black and white as some assessments make out, particularly those in the popular media. Often the black core of malpractice is surrounded by a grey penumbra. Therefore, an historian making a judgment of past practices must not only be well informed as to the facts of the case and its historical context but also discerning as to its nuances. A case in point is a recent program on ABC Radio National concerning Magdalen laundries.

On 8 August 2023 the ABC broadcast a program in its ‘The History Listen’ series entitled ‘The Missing Magdalens’ about St Magdalen’s Retreat, Tempe. The program is described on the ABC web site as follows:

Magdalene Laundries for “fallen women” date back to 12th century Europe. These were Catholic-run institutions to reform “wayward” women, known as Magdalens, through strict religious observance and hard work. Recently in Ireland, shocking revelations have come to light about the conditions these women endured. But this was somewhere else, not Australia. Until Donna Abela found that a Magdalene laundry once existed near her home in Sydney, at Tempe. Donna goes in search of Tempe’s Missing Magdalens. She stumbles across a hidden story and reveals a very personal one of her own.<sup>1</sup>

Readers of this journal will not be as surprised as Donna Abela to learn that

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1 <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/the-history-listen/the-history-listen-magdalen-laundry-tempe-catholic/102620008>

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Magdalen laundries existed in Australia or that there was one at Tempe. In 2013 the journal carried a personal account of an inmate of a Magdalen laundry in Hobart and published a detailed article on the subject by James Franklin in which he discussed St Magdalen's, Tempe. More than a decade before those articles appeared, Margaret Walsh wrote a book on the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in which she discussed several laundries run by the order, including the one at Tempe. And in 1987 historian Judith Godden wrote about women's refuges run by Catholics and Protestants in the late nineteenth century that referred to St Magdalen's.<sup>2</sup>

What distinguishes Franklin's and Walsh's, and Godden's assessments from 'The Missing Magdalens' is that they describe not only the black core of malpractice but also the grey penumbra. They acknowledge the shortcomings and abuses that took place inside these institutions but do so considering the broader context and the nuances. In his article, Professor Franklin observed:

They [Magdalen laundries] began as refuges but turned into prisons. ... As the laundries came to be used as dumping grounds for girls picked up by the police, got rid of by their parents and stepparents, or sent on by jails and other institutions, they turned into penal institutions with locks, barred windows and walls. The attitudes of inmates followed suit.

In his conclusion, Franklin made the following points:

First, the sisters faced an immensely difficult task, and one that only they were prepared to take on. It was a task they performed without material benefit to themselves. ... Second, there is an issue about the perceptions of people from backgrounds as disturbed and deprived as many of the girls in the laundries. Put simply, those who do not receive love early have difficulty perceiving positive human interactions. ... Yet when all that is fully taken into account, the consistent story of former inmates includes a high level of gratuitous positive cruelty and emotional deprivation.

The story of Magdalen laundries in Australia is one that should be more widely known and it is right that the ABC should play a part in bringing that story to a wider audience. But 'The Missing Magdalens' fails to tell it well. Apart from the program's general lack of balance referred to below, the 'hidden story' across which Donna Abela stumbled and which forms the

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2 Janice Konstantinidis, 'Life in "The Mag"', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, Vol. 34, 2013, pp. 91–102; James Franklin, 'Convent Slave Laundries? Magdalen Asylums in Australia', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, Vol. 34, 2013, pp. 70–90; Margaret Walsh, *The Good Sams: Sisters of the Good Samaritan 1857–1969*, John Garratt, Mulgrave, Vic., 2001; Judith Godden, 'Sectarianism and Purity Within the Woman's Sphere: Sydney Refuges During the Late Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1987, pp. 291–306.

basis of the program's judgments about conditions at Tempe, was exposed as fraudulent more than a century ago.

Set in 1906, the so-called 'hidden story' was not hidden at all but widely covered in the secular and religious press at the time. It started with a speech by Rev. William Dill Macky on 8 July 1906 to a Loyal Orange Institution function in the Sydney Town Hall in which he referred to 'a girl' who had escaped from a convent near Sydney.<sup>3</sup> On 14 July 1906 the *Watchman* newspaper, the organ of Dill Macky's Australian Protestant Defence Association, gave further particulars in an article headlined 'Rome's "Industrial" Institutions/THE TEMPE LAUNDRY/Three Women Break Loose/ONE TELLS HER STORY'<sup>4</sup>

The 'one' was 25-year-old May Gould, who told the *Watchman* her tale of misery starting with her being a servant at the Catholic presbytery in Bathurst and ending with her 'escape' from St Magdalen's to the home of a Protestant family who took her in. The ABC's program quotes extensively from Ms Gould's statement as published in the *Watchman*. It is the program's sole source for the treatment of women inmates at St Magdalen's.

Relying on a single source, particularly a notoriously anti-Catholic one, for a sensitive story about a controversial Catholic institution is bad enough. But what is even worse is that the program failed to tell its listeners that three weeks later the *Watchman* admitted that May Gould had lied to them and that she had made a false statutory declaration about her circumstances:

'For some reason or other the woman has chosen to deceive the gentleman and his wife who took her into their home on the strength of her story, clothed and fed her and obtained for her a situation. She also, for the same reason presumably, chose to lie to us, to Dr Macky, to two justices of the peace, and several other persons in a most unblushing manner, and above all to make a declaration which is false in several particulars.'<sup>5</sup>

It turns out that Ms Gould, also known as Maud Harris, had never worked at the Bathurst presbytery but had gone straight to St Magdalen's after her release from Bathurst gaol where she had been serving a sentence of 18 months' hard labour following her convictions for larceny and 'stealing in a dwelling house'. Seriously embarrassed, the *Watchman* not only denounced its star witness as a liar, it also reported her to the police and forwarded the papers to the Minister for Justice.

Yet, none of this was mentioned in the program. Even worse, the narrator

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3 *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 July 1906, p. 5 (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article14784745>).

4 *Watchman* 14 July 1906, p. 8 (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article111964380>).

5 *Watchman* 4 August 1906, p. 4 (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article111964484>).

also failed to inform the program's listeners that Ms Gould's allegations of mistreatment at Tempe were refuted in many articles and letters published at the time in Bathurst's *National Advocate* and in Sydney's Catholic newspapers.<sup>6</sup> In fact, on the same day as the original *Watchman* article was published, the *Freeman's Journal* contained a detailed point by point rebuttal of Macky's allegations, which prompted the *Watchman* to reinvestigate the matter.<sup>7</sup>



May Gould, 1903 (*Gaol Inmates/Prisoners Photos Index 1870-1930, State Archives NSW, Series NRS1998 Item [3/13074], p 252*)

An example of Ms Gould's mendacity is her claim there were children of 'about nine years of age' working in the laundry, a claim denied by the mother superior. In a 1984 thesis on St Magdalen's, Marion Fox gave the age ranges of inmates admitted each year to the retreat. In the period of Ms Gould's stay, the youngest was 13. Referring to another claim by Ms Gould, that she had been imprisoned and forced to work for 16 hours a day, Ms Fox wrote, 'this claim was discredited and shown to be a sectarian attack'.<sup>8</sup>

I can only assume that the program makers are not familiar with the sectarianism of those times. In describing the *Watchman* newspaper, Ms Abela stated it was established 'to defend the interests of Protestants against Roman Catholicism'. This, of course, is

a naïve and ill-informed characterisation of that particular journal. In his article on William Dill Macky in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*,

6 *National Advocate* 9 July 1906, p. 2; 10 July 1906, p. 4; 12 July 1906, p. 2; *Freeman's Journal* 14 July 1906, p. 14–15; 21 July 1906, p. 17; 28 July 1906, p. 13; *Catholic Press* 12 July 1906, p. 22; 19 July 1906, p. 23.

7 *Freeman's Journal* 14 July 1906, pp. 14–15; 21 July 1906, p. 17; 28 July 1906, p. 13

8 Marion Fox, 'From Penitence to pastoral care: the work of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan at St Magdalen's Retreat, Tempe (Arncliffe)', MEd thesis, University of New England, 1984, pp. 85, 96.

historian Richard Broome wrote, 'In 1902–04 [Dill Macky] edited the *Watchman*, which, **filled with anti-Catholic fanaticism**, sold 20,000 copies a week.' [Emphasis added].

Furthermore, relying on Ms Gould's account to provide evidence of what went on inside the Magdalen Retreat, the program repeated an anti-Catholic libel that was current in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Judith Godden noted in her article on women's refuges:

Catholics had to counter constant stories of women being forcibly detained in convents. ... Militant Protestants were eager to countenance such claims and to believe that the refuge inmates were also forcibly kept under Catholic control. Sydney's leading Orangeman, Dr Dill Macky, championed the cause of one inmate [May Gould] who claimed that she had been forcibly detained by the nuns and forced to work in the refuge laundry from four (presumably a.m.) to eight p.m. When her claims were discredited, at least one paper concluded that the episode had been a plot by 'Rome' to discredit the Orangemen!<sup>9</sup>

According to the mother superior of the Tempe Retreat, who was interviewed by the *Freeman's Journal*, the gates to the Retreat were always open. She also said that May Gould had previously left the Retreat of her own volition in October/November 1905 only to return eight or ten days later. Thereafter, she remained at the Retreat until 3 July 1906 when she again freely walked out of the grounds, doing so without informing the convent authorities. The next day she again returned to the Retreat but was told she could not remain at Tempe but could go to the Buckingham Street refuge. It was then, after being refused re-entry to Tempe, that she told her story to the *Watchman*.<sup>10</sup>

This episode was not the first time that the *Watchman* had cried wolf concerning a Catholic institution. In 1903 the newspaper had run a series of articles critical of the Manly Industrial School and Orphanage run by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. The articles, later published in a pamphlet entitled, 'Convent Horrors', were based on the testimony of a former inmate.<sup>11</sup> When the allegations were raised in parliament the government set up an inquiry conducted by Mr Alfred W. Green, Chief Officer under the *Children's Protection Act 1902*, and Sub-Inspector William J. Tindall of the New South Wales Police, neither of whom was a Catholic. Their report dated 11 February 1904 found:

The closest investigation has failed to elicit any evidence in corroboration

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9 Godden, op. cit., p. 296.

10 *Freeman's Journal* 14 July 1906, pp. 14–15 (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article108030647>).

11 *Watchman* 20 June 1903, pp. 4, 5; 27 June 1903, p. 4; 4 July 1903, p. 5; 11 July 1903, p. 5; 19 March 1904, p. 8.

of the statements of ill-treatment or neglect of the children in any particular, either at the date (six years ago) when the cruelties were alleged to have been inflicted, or at the present time. Dr Watkins was visiting medical officer six years ago, and his evidence is typical of the unanimous testimony in support of the good care and kindly treatment bestowed on the children by the officers of the institution.<sup>12</sup>

The exoneration of the Manly Industrial School and Orphanage and the discrediting of May Gould regarding her criticism of St Madgalen's, Tempe should not lead us to conclude that problems did not exist in those institutions. But those facts are essential background information for historians passing judgment on them.

The failure of the makers of 'The Missing Magdalens' to inform the program's listeners that Ms Gould had been exposed as a liar and that her account was contested raises a question as to whether the program's makers were ignorant of these facts, which is bad enough for a history program on the national broadcaster, or whether they chose to present factual content in a way that was materially misleading to the program's audience.

But the program makers are guilty not only of sins of omission but also of commission. In informing listeners that Ms Gould had been in prison, Ms Abela presented that information in a manner critical of the mother superior: 'Her past should have been off limits. Rules are rules. But mother superior was in damage control. Mother superior published May Gould's prison record for petty theft, poured her good name down the drain.'

Ms Abela's gratuitous criticism is comprehensively wrong. The fact that May Gould had been in prison was disclosed in the National Advocate (Bathurst) on 12 July 1906 in a letter by Mgr M. Long (Vicar-General of the Diocese of Bathurst) in answer to Dill Macky's claim that Ms Gould had gone from working at the Catholic presbytery in Bathurst to the Tempe laundry. The purpose of his disclosure was not to pour Ms Gould's good name down the drain but to rebut the lie regarding the role of the Bathurst Catholic presbytery in the affair.

As well as relying heavily on May Gould's discredited statement, 'The Missing Magdalens' generally treats the subject superficially and lacks balance. The program fails to ask the big questions: why did these institutions exist in Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; how and why did women come into these institutions? It jumps from a twelfth-century explanation to the twentieth century and from Ireland to Australia as if the change in time and space was of no consequence. Moreover, we do not hear

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<sup>12</sup> 'Roman Catholic Orphanage, Manly: report respecting management', NSW Legislative Assembly, V&P, 1904, Vol. 2, pp. 901–910.

from any of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan who ran the Tempe retreat from 1888 to 1980.

In informing its listeners about the Tempe institution, the program relates the complaints of one inmate, the discredited May Gould, as if she was typical of all. It provides no figures to indicate how many women passed through St Magdalen's, Tempe and how many managed to escape from their dysfunctional pasts to end up married with families. No good-news stories are told. It fails to appreciate that the nuns operated laundries not to punish 'fallen women' but to provide work and, in the absence of government funding, to earn an income to house and feed women who had been abandoned by their families and by the society at large and who would otherwise have been out on the street earning a living by whatever means possible. It ignores the fact that except for women sent to these institutions by the courts to serve their sentences, the inmates were free to leave if they wished.

More egregiously, it fails to tell the stories of the sisters who dedicated their lives to helping these women, preferring to paint the nuns uniformly as strict and uncaring disciplinarians. No doubt, many of them were, as Franklin pointed out in his article, but many others showed kindness and respect to the inmates and tried to improve their lives. The program rightly claims that women's stories are often not told in our histories, but nuns are women, too, and their stories should also be told. To understand how these institutions were run we need to know the facts from the point of view of both the inmates and those responsible for their care.

As Franklin and Walsh have pointed out in their writings on the Magdalen laundries, there were abuses and inappropriate practices that occurred in these institutions. But that is not the full story. As observed above, a just assessment of practices of the past can only be made with knowledge of the facts and circumstances that shaped those practices. Relying on discredited sources, failing to convey essential background information, and telling only the negative side of the story of Australia's Magdalen laundries is not an appropriate way for any historian, let alone the ABC's 'The History Listen' program, to address such a complex and controversial aspect of this country's past.



'The Missing Magdalens': the ABC resurrects a 'hidden story' already discredited

*Dr Kildea lodged a complaint with the ABC concerning the program. His complaint was referred to the ABC Ombudsman. While declining to expressly uphold his complaint, the ABC Ombudsman stated, 'the program makers have agreed to revisions that are currently underway, to better contextualise the way in which the May Gould story was disputed' and 'the program makers have also agreed to make revisions that provide more of the story of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan'. While the revised program gives more background on Magdalen laundries in Australia and the role of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, it continues to rely on May Gould's story without informing listeners that she was denounced as a liar by those who initially promoted her story.*