

CONVENT SLAVE LAUNDRIES? MAGDALEN ASYLUMS IN AUSTRALIA

James Franklin*

A staple of extreme Protestant propaganda in the first half of the twentieth century was the accusation of ‘convent slave laundries’. Anti-Catholic organs like *The Watchman* and *The Rock* regularly alleged extremely harsh conditions in Roman Catholic convent laundries and reported stories of abductions into them and escapes from them.¹

In Ireland, the scandal of Magdalen laundries has been the subject of extensive official inquiries.² Allegations of widespread near-slave conditions and harsh punishments turned out to be substantially true.³ The Irish state has apologized,⁴ memoirs have been written, compensation paid, a movie made.⁵ Something similar occurred in England.⁶

1 ‘Attack on convents’, *Argus* 21/1/1907, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/10610696>; ‘Abbotsford convent again: another girl abducted’, *The Watchman* 22/7/1915, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/111806210>; ‘Protestant Federation: Why it is needed: Charge of slavery in convents’, *Maitland Daily Mercury* 23/4/1921, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/123726627>; ‘Founder of “The Rock” at U.P.A. rally’, *Northern Star* 2/4/1947, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/99154812>.

2 Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ireland, 2009), ch. 18, <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/pdfs/CICA-VOL3-18.pdf>;
Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries (McAleese Report, 2013), <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013>; summary at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/05/magdalene-laundries-ireland-state-guilt>

3 J.M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame Ind, 2007); older history in R.L. McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries: An analytical history* (McFarland, Jefferson NC, 2010). (Although the best-selling memoir of alleged abuse is apparently false: H. Kelly, *Kathy’s Real Story: A culture of false allegations exposed* (Prefect Press, Dunleer, 2007)).

4 Enda Kennedy’s State apology to the Magdalene women, 19/2/13, transcript at <http://www.thejournal.ie/full-text-enda-kenny-magdalene-apology-801132-Feb2013/>

5 The Magdalene Sisters (2002), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Magdalene_Sisters

6 R. Kollar, Magdalenes and nuns: convent laundries in late Victorian England, *Anglican & Episcopal History* 73 (2004), 309-334.

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What of Australia?

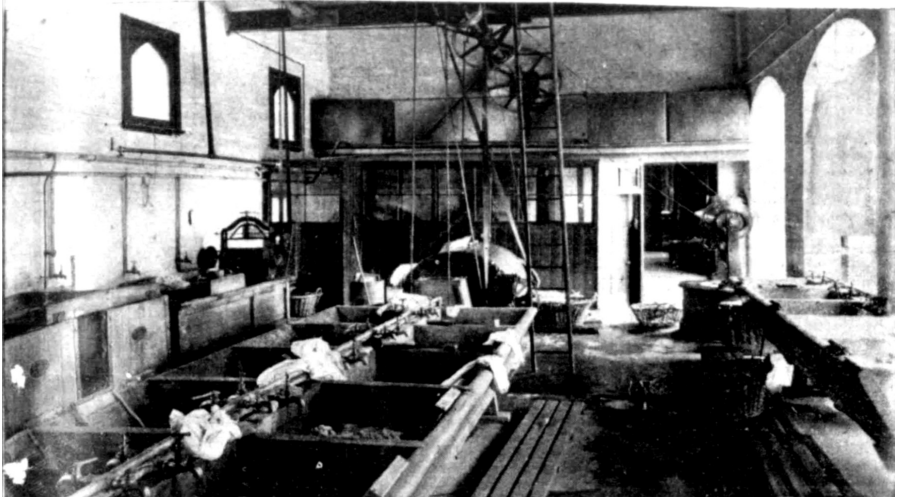
The convent laundry system

Australia did have a similar system. Conditions were indeed harsh, but it remains not easy to gain a just overview of what happened. Views conflict sharply. Apparently genuine memories of very oppressive conditions conflict with nun's recollections of their doing their best for difficult cases. This article aims to present both sides of the story.

Each Australian state capital had, from about the 1890s to the 1960s, a large convent which contained a commercial laundry where the work was done by mostly teenage 'fallen women' who were placed in the convent, voluntarily or involuntarily, for reasons such as being destitute, uncontrollable, picked up by the police and similar.⁷ Most were run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, an order that specialized in 'wayward' girls. They included the head house at Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne (1864-1974),⁸ with offshoots at Oakleigh and Albert Park,⁹ the Home of the Good Shepherd, Ashfield, Sydney (1913-1969),¹⁰ the Good Shepherd Convent, Mitchelton, Brisbane (1931-1978),¹¹ Mount Saint Canice, Sandy Bay, Hobart (1893-1974),¹² 'The Pines', North Plympton, Adelaide (1941-1974); the Home of the Good Shepherd, Leederville, Perth (1902-1979),¹³ and St Aidan's, Bendigo.¹⁴ Similar

- 7 A. Gill, 'Bad girls do the best sheets', *Sydney Morning Herald* 24/4/2003, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/04/23/1050777303111.html>; also ABC Radio National documentary, 'Bad girls do the best sheets', 9/4/2001, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/bad-girls-do-the-best-sheets/3479892>.
- 8 C. Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents on Distant Shores: A History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Tahiti* (Playwright Publishing, Caringbah, 2006, 2nd ed, 2010); Anon, *Abbotsford Centenary 1863-1963* (Collingwood, 1963), 'The Abbotsford convent and the Magdalen asylum', *Kilmore Free Press* 13/10/1881, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/57701643>. Photos of the present state of the building at <http://www.abbotsfordconvent.com.au/history-heritage/buildings>; a 2008 video tour at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIfJI-XGISo>
- 9 L. Schwartz, 'A local spin on the laundries of shame', *Age* 27/4/2003, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/04/26/1051316051211.html>
- 10 Gill, 'Bad girls'; photos at <http://nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/collecting/photos/good-shepherd-dormitory-bed-making/>; <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an24493557>; brief positive recollections of former workers in 'Home from home for five faithful ladies of Glenworth', *Sydney Morning Herald* 1/7/1981.
- 11 <http://mitchymemories.blogspot.com.au/2013/03/site-78-good-shepherd-convent-home-and.html>
- 12 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Saint_Canice
- 13 <http://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/wa/WE00100>; <http://annfreespirit.50megs.com/custom4.html>
- 14 A recollection at <http://nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/2011/08/19/the-nuns-thought-we-were-criminals/>

establishments run by other orders were those of the Good Samaritans in Sydney – Pitt Street (1857-1901), Manly (1881-1910) and St Magdalen's, Tempe (1888-1980),¹⁵ and St Joseph's in Adelaide, run by the St Joseph Sisters.¹⁶ Information on most of these is available in the two professional institutional histories of the orders, Christine Kovesi's *Pitch Your Tents on Distant Shores: A History of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Tahiti* and Margaret Walsh's *The Good Sams: Sisters of the Good Samaritan 1857-1969*.



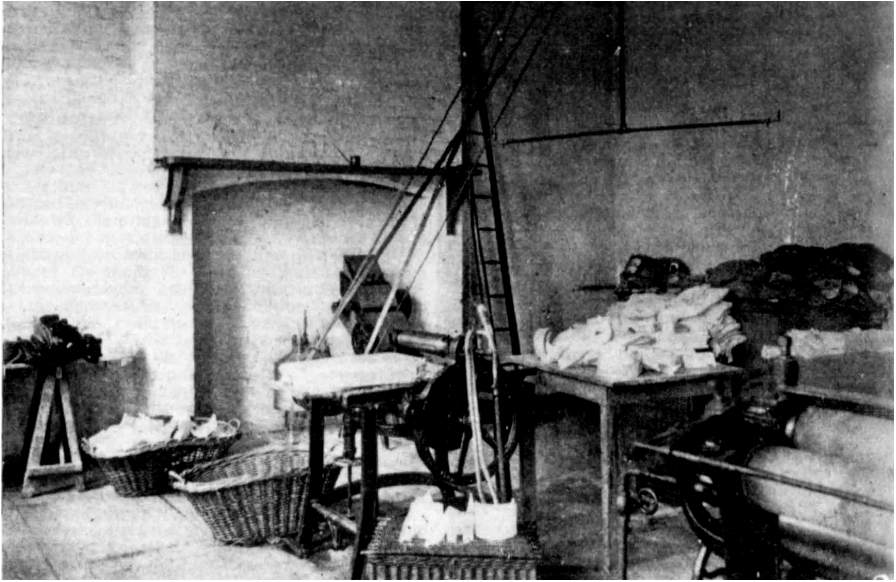
Interior of the laundry, St Magdalen's Retreat, Tempe, 1899¹⁷

They were large operations. In 1904, Abbotsford had about 366 'Magdalen penitents' (with another 154 at Albert Park), with 110 nuns (including novices) –

15 M. Walsh, *The Good Sams: Sisters of the Good Samaritan 1857-1969* (John Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave, 2001), 162-192; H. Taylor, 'The Magdalen refuge at Tempe', *Sydney Morning Herald* 20/1/1890, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/28276773>; 'Death of Rev. Mother Gertrude', *Freeman's Journal* 17/9/1898, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/115385376>; 'St Magdalene's Retreat, Tempe', *Australian Town and Country Journal* 10/6/1899, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/71329414> with photos at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/5321101>; records available in Records of Sisters of the Good Samaritan Convent, Arncliffe, 1877-1948 [microform] (W. & F. Pascoe Pty. Ltd., Balgowlah, for the Society of Australian Genealogists, 1982).

16 'St Joseph's Refuge', *The Register* 28/5/1903, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/55429124>

17 For both Interior of the laundry, St Magdalen's Retreat, Tempe, *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 10/6/1899, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/5321101/>



Interior of the laundry, St Magdalen's Retreat, Tempe, 1899

that did not count 310 children in the 'Industrial and Preservation' class and 290 in a day school for the surrounding area.¹⁸ At its height in the years after WWII, there were 1000 women and children (that includes the orphanage and other parts as well as the refuge) plus 120 nuns and novices.¹⁹

Laundry work was regarded as suitable as it did not need much training and made money without great capital expense. The moral point of it was explained by the head nun of Abbotsford about 1890:

the inmates are principally engaged in laundry work, this being, in the opinion of the sisters, the most suited to all, and calculated to occupy the mind and body, leaving little time for melancholy reflection on the past or anything except the work of reformation.²⁰

18 Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents*, 206; also 'The Abbotsford convent', *Argus* 1/2/1907, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/10612917>.

19 <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/on-a-mission/2006/12/17/1166290410670.html>

20 Report of the Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions 1890-91, p. 1272, quoted in J. Monk, *Cleansing their souls: laundries in institutions for fallen women*, *Lilith* 9 (1996), 21-32

Memories of harsh conditions

Memories of conditions in the convent laundries by those who were in them are overwhelmingly negative. The complaints detail a pattern of verbal abuse, shaming, lack of love and extremely hard work. Any one recollection might be put down as exaggerated, but the story is consistent.

An inmate of Abbotsford recalls:

We girls got up early, went to mass, came back, attended the refectory where we all had breakfast (such as it was) then we went to work. I was only a kid back then and didn't know better, I just accepted their slavery as normal! . . . We had a huge bath and toilet area. We had a bath once a fortnight from memory and even so the water we used had been used several times before we got in Y....UCKO! The crows, usually called auxiliaries, would drag us down there and beat the bejes-s out of us if some nun had a complaint against any of us. Never mind if it was true or not. Biff! Bash! And cop that! Until we grew older and now and then fought back.²¹

Typical are the memories of Janice Konstantinidis, an inmate of Mount Saint Canice in the 1960s (her recollections are printed in full in the accompanying article):

Other forms of punishment took the form of the extra cleaning of the dormitory floors. Used tea leaves were thrown over the floors, which we would then have to sweep and polish. There was a large, red cement hallway that ran through various areas of the home. Scrubbing this hallway while on my hands and knees was a job that I came to know well. It would take me over two hours, and I was expected to use a toothbrush for the grouted areas. I would be given this punishment for simply asking "why?", or for taking too long in the toilets. They did not consider the fact that I suffered from constipation and that hurrying was, therefore, impossible for me.²²

From 'The Pines', Plympton:

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- 21 <http://abbotsfordblog.com/memories-on-abbotsford-convent-on-an-ebay-discussion-forum/> A book of poems based on interviews of former Abbotsford residents (in various parts of the establishment): P. Sykes, *The Abbotsford Mysteries* (Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2011); a fictional version based on research in K. Greenwood, *Unnatural Habits: A Phyrne Fisher Mystery* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2012).
- 22 J. Konstantinidis, *Life in "The Mag"*, National Museum of Australia online exhibition 'Inside: Life in children's homes', 2011, <http://nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/2011/02/28/life-in-the-mag/>. Another hostile account of Mount Saint Canice at <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/288361>

*The nuns' constant vilification branded us – as livestock are branded – by fire. We were treated as mere objects of contempt, there to earn our wretched keep in Magdalene Infernos around the world.*²³

And recalling the first day at 'The Pines':

*Mother Superior materialised. It was as though she glided into the room from out of nowhere, with her long black habit flowing all round her, she startled me. 'Your name will be Jane' she instructed. Then she opened THAT door which led to a concrete court yard. Before I could ask a single question the door was slammed and bolted behind me.*²⁴

From Leederville:

*It was a bugger of a life. The nuns were cruel. They belted us, hit us with bunches of keys and put us in straitjackets like Chinese dolls. I'm still deaf in one ear after a belting. I cut my plaits off so they couldn't pull me up by them. I was very miserable as a child.*²⁵

There are a few less negative comments. Victoria Stuart, who was in Mount Saint Canice from the ages of 15 to 18 in the early 1960s, found it an improvement after a very difficult time in a Salvation Army home, which followed a disturbed home life that included rape by a neighbour. She felt cared for by the nuns, saying 'the nuns did care about what happened to us' (though she resented the long hours of work without pay). She saw the wall around the convent as 'to stop blokes coming in', not to confine the girls. When she became pregnant later she returned to the nuns.²⁶

A reasonably positive view of Abbotsford may be inferred on the part of former laundry inmate Mrs Cecilia Ryan, who returned to stay temporarily at Abbotsford in 1967 at the time of the execution of her son Ronald Ryan.²⁷ (There are also some more positive memories from those in other parts of the complex, such as the orphanage.²⁸)

Almost entirely absent from the recollections are stories of sexual abuse and

23 <http://magdalenaundrytestimony.org/#/australian-magdalen-laundries/4576129509>; further in Rachael Romero's film *In the Shadow of Eden* (<http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/detail/rachael-romero-on-in-the-shadow-of-eden>); "The Pines" compared to a prisoner of war camp in Andrew Murray's Senate speech in 2008 (<http://www.forgottenaustralians.com/pdf/AUSTRALIANDEMOCRATSPEECHES.pdf>).

24 <http://nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/2011/04/19/in-the-beginning/>

25 <http://annfreespirit.50megs.com/custom4.html>

26 Victoria Stuart interviewed by Rob Willis in the *Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project*, 2011, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5751943>

27 Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents*, 297.

28 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5717375>; <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5017833>

of serious physical assaults and beatings²⁹ (although there are some memories of corporal punishment of the kind then common in schools, such as ‘They used to belt you with wet towels’³⁰). That agrees with the Irish experience, where there are almost no such allegations (contrary to some popular perceptions).³¹ In many cases, that contrasted with the girls’ lives before entry. The negative memories involve instead mental cruelty, confinement and very hard work.

Then, as in any underfunded institution, there was the food. ‘Breakfast [at Abbotsford] was luke-warm porridge with a slice of STALE bread. Lunch on the other hand was soup, with the morning’s left over porridge added for volume!’³² Regular doses of epsom salts are remembered with particular loathing.³³

One aspect of deprivation that may not be expected by modern readers was the silence. In accordance with the traditions of the nuns, work and much of the rest of the day proceeded in silence. Some of the allowed talk was strictly supervised. A visitor to the Tempe asylum in 1890 explains one purpose: ‘One great element of success in the system of the refuge is the impossibility of the relation of experiences among the inmates. When at work, or at meals, or in the dormitories, silence is compulsory. Proper periods are allowed for conversation, which is carried on in, and improved by, the presence of the nuns.’³⁴

Another aspect of the deprivation suffered by inmates was the very poor quality of education, or for more senior girls, the total lack of it. The visitor to Tempe, while praising all other aspects of it, ‘regretted to notice an absence of books or means of wholesome recreation’ (he is told that lack of money is the cause). One of those who made a submission to the Senate’s Forgotten Australians inquiry says she worked from the ages of 8 to 12 in Mount St Canice without any schooling.³⁵ That was of course illegal.

Other dangers of life in the homes included diseases and industrial accidents (which were of course common in outside workplaces too). Doris Dyer lost her

29 But one allegation of sexual abuse by other girls at Abbotsford at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/former-residents-to-boycott-nuns-reunion-20130620-2olqm.html>; some memories of corporal punishment at Leederville: <http://annfreespirit.50megs.com/custom4.html>

30 Schwartz, ‘A local spin on the laundries of shame’.

31 McAleese report, ch. 19.

32 <http://abbotsfordblog.com/memories-on-abbotsford-convent-on-an-ebay-discussion-forum/>

33 Konstantinidis, *Life in “The Mag”*; <http://annfreespirit.50megs.com/custom4.html>;

34 Taylor, *The Magdalen Refuge at Tempe*.

35 Forgotten Australians, submission 182 (Report section 4.71); also in <http://magdalenelaundrytestimony.org/#/australian-magdalone-laundries/4576129509>

right arm in an accident with the mangle shortly after starting at the Leederville laundry in 1942 (she says the nuns treated her well afterwards).³⁶ Sister Mary of St Columba at Abbotsford badly injured her hand in the laundry machinery in 1889 and had to have it amputated; she “bore her cross with admirable fortitude, offering her sufferings for the conversion of our loved Penitents to whom she is so devoted.”³⁷ Physical effects of the heavy work could show up later: “I worked in the laundry. I did the slave child labour for them. I worked on the presses. I’m definitely paying for it now ... physically I’m just no good. I’m 56 and I can barely get around.”³⁸ Victoria Stuart at Mount Saint Canice believed her lungs were damaged by the high levels of bleach used on the laundry from the infectious diseases hospital.³⁹

Conditions of manual work were harsh everywhere, even if pay was better. Lynette Kluck, at Leederville in the 1950s, says she found the work just as hard later in a commercial laundry.⁴⁰

The alternative homes for girls in trouble no doubt varied but some were worse. The state-run Parramatta Girls Home, which also had a laundry, had similar harsh conditions but a worse record for assaults.⁴¹

Confinement and escape

A profound change in the nature of the institutions goes some way towards explaining what happened. They began as refuges but turned into prisons. In early years, there was emphasis on the freedom of inmates to leave, and the conditions from which inmates came were often not such as to invite return. The visitor to the Magdelene Asylum at Tempe in 1890 reported:

... the applicants shall be fallen women, and that they undertake to remain in the refuge for two years. There is nothing, however, in connection with the place, which is open on all sides, to compel them to keep this promise ... Upon my inquiring of several women, “Why do you stay here when you could earn good wages outside?” The reply was invariably “We are happy here; there is no temptation; we get plenty of everything; the sisters are good to us.”⁴²

36 <http://annfreespirit.50megs.com/custom4.html>

37 Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents*, 157.

38 ‘Former residents to boycott nuns’ reunion’, *Age* 21/6/2013, <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/former-residents-to-boycott-nuns-reunion-20130620-2olqm.html>

39 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5751943>

40 <http://annfreespirit.50megs.com/custom4.html>

41 B. Djuric, *Abandon All Hope: A History of Parramatta Girls Industrial School* (Chargan My Book Publisher, Perth, 2011); earlier, N. Williamson, Laundry maids or ladies? Life in the Industrial and Reformatory School for Girls in NSW, Part II, 1887 to 1910, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 68 (1983), 312-324.

42 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20/1/1890, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/28276773> 77

The Good Shepherd order was originally founded to provide asylums to destitute women, that is, places of voluntary refuge in something the same way as modern women's refuges. They were only with some difficulty persuaded to expand their work to involuntary cases – Bishop Goold in Melbourne encountered resistance in 1864 when he asked the nuns at Abbotsford to add a Reformatory to their work, but succeeded in overcoming it.⁴³ The Good Samaritans faced the same problem. Their founder, Archbishop Polding, had visited an establishment in England what was 'prison-like with bars and locks', and rejected that model for New South Wales.⁴⁴ The Good Samaritans continued that policy for the early decades of their Magdalen institutions. But from 1907 they became involved with the Children's Court and accepted girls who were sentenced to custody for a fixed period. Those came to dominate the intake.⁴⁵

As the laundries came to be used as dumping grounds for girls picked up by the police, got rid of by their parents and step-parents, 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: 'I was in Abbotsford and it was little more than a prison. There was no way to walk out the door, they were all locked. I was forcibly restrained more than once trying to get away.'⁴⁶ An institution where inmates are forcibly confined is very different from one full of the willing. It is necessarily full of resentment on the part of the inmates, many of whom are also the kind of people already resistant to authority and routine by the time of arrival. No-one loves their jailers.

As a counterpart, it is full of desperate and aggressive disciplinary strategies on the part of the (untrained) warders.

The context is that the mid-twentieth century was the high point of belief in the benefits of forcible institutionalization – of mental patients, removed aboriginal children, child migrants and others. In the twentieth century, some 500,000 children are believed to have undergone institutional care in Australia.⁴⁷

Inevitably, escapes and attempted escapes were frequent. Convent escape stories

43 Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents*, 71.

44 Walsh, *The Good Sams*, 169.

45 Walsh, 172-4, 182.

46 <http://abbotsfordblog.com/catherine-kovesis-book-pitch-your-tents-on-distant-shores/>

47 A. Chynoweth, 'Let our histories be visible', *ReCollections* 7 (1) (2012), http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume_7_number_1/commentary/let_our_histories_be_visible

were sometimes reported in the newspapers: Abbotsford in 1905,⁴⁸ Abbotsford again in 1920 and 1923,⁴⁹ from Ashfield on a rope of knotted sheets in 1954.⁵⁰ Escapees caught were usually sent back.

One of the more difficult cases in Mount Saint Canice, Evelyn (in the late 1960s), recalls:

The authorities decided the Salvation Army wouldn't be able to handle me, so I was eventually sent to Magdalene Girls Home in Sandy Bay... After a couple of years I started to run away, I would scale the fences, undo the bars on the windows, get out through the laundry, whatever way I could, I was always taken back by the police, boy, then I would cop it. The nuns chopped off my hair with garden sheers, I would be made to scrub corridors with a toothbrush, I would be placed in a shoe cupboard for hours at a time ... Eventually I was given Largactyl this was a drug to sedate me and to quieten me down, I was given 50mg at first, then increased it to 100mg, they would stand over me and watch me take it to make sure that I had taken it. On one of my escapades, I actually got to Burnie met this guy and I had sex with him, I don't know why, maybe I was looking for someone to love me. Well the moral of this story is I got pregnant. I was taken back to Mt, St. Canice (Magdalene Home renamed).⁵¹

(She was sent to the Salvation Army home and the baby forcibly adopted.)

Sometimes the authorities were over-enthusiastic about rounding up escaped girls. The Melbourne *Argus* of 1927 reported an escape that came before the courts:

ESCAPE FROM CONVENT.

GIRL SWIMS YARRA.

Maisie King aged 17 years, recently an inmate of the Abbotsford Convent, appeared in the Fitzroy Court on Thursday on a charge of having been without sufficient lawful means of support.

48 'The Abbotsford Convent: Story of an escaped girl', *The Watchman* 24/6/1905, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/111962032>; A Protestant story from Sydney of 1904 in 'Escape from a Sydney convent', *The Watchman* 15/10/1904, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/111922093>

49 'Escaped from convent', *Sydney Morning Herald* 17/8/1920, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/15902574>; 'Girl escapes from convent: climbs 18ft. wall', *Riverine Herald* 7/4/1923, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/115175910>; 'Escaped from convent', *Argus* 13/4/1923, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/1889875>.

50 'Escaped from convent to get outside job', *Mail* (Adelaide) 28/8/1954, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/58101331>

51 <http://www.adoptionoriginistas.com/stcanice.html>

Policewoman Connor said: -Defendant was placed in the Abbotsford Convent by her mother who declared that she was unable to control her. On the morning of April 11, defendant, in company with five other girls, swam the river and escaped from the convent. In company with Constable McGregor I arrested defendant at Fairfield on April 12.

King said: -My home life was unhappy, and some time ago I asked the sergeant of police at Richmond if I would be justified in leaving home. He explained that if I left home and kept myself respectably I could not be taken back against my will. I obtained a position with a drapery firm and left home. I was paid £2/10/ a week, and I rented a room at Port Melbourne for which I paid 12/6 a week. Then at the instance of my mother I was taken into a taxi-cab under the pretext of being taken to a doctor. I was driven, however, to the Abbotsford Convent, where I was taken in, contrary to my will. In order to escape from the convent I had to cross the river. I am well able to earn my living and to look after myself.

Mr W.G. Smith: Can you get any work?

King: Too right I can!

Mr. Smith: That's the spirit. It appears that the warrant was issued for the arrest of this girl as a means of getting her back to the institution from which she escaped. I cannot say that she is without means. On the contrary, I believe that she is a very willing worker.

The case was dismissed.⁵²

The more secure the security, the more dangerous escape attempts could be. Janice Konstantinidis's memoir of Mount St Canice recalls an attempt of 1964:

A group of three girls was planning to escape one Sunday night while the rest of the girls were watching a film. I was in my dormitory helping to bathe Kerrie Anne when they attempted to escape. I had gone to the window to see if I could see them jump. They had planned to jump from the third floor bathroom window – this was one of the few windows that had no bars – to a ledge, to another ledge, and then to the roof of the first floor, which was concrete and had been added on to the home in its later years. The first girl jumped, but lost her footing when attempting to land on the ledge. She kept falling until she landed on the concrete roof. I heard her fall and saw that she lay still. The alarm was sounded by someone and the flood lights came on. An ambulance and the police were called. We soon learnt that the girl had broken her back. We never saw

⁵² *Argus* 16/4/1927, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3849362>, combined with 'Escaped from Convent', *Mirror* (Perth) 23/4/1927, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/76401079>

her again. We were told that after being discharged from the hospital, she was sent to Lachlan Park, which was a mental institution.⁵³

An escape attempt from the third floor can hardly have been a surprise, since *The Rock* had complained about exactly that sixteen years earlier. *The Rock*'s editor, Wal Campbell,⁵⁴ claimed to have interviewed two 14-year-old girls who had been severely injured jumping from the third floor of Mount Saint Canice in 1948.⁵⁵ While *The Rock* is not a reliable source, the details of the interviews with the girls agree with other accounts, so it seems that in this case Campbell came across a true story. The story was also reported in the Tasmanian press.⁵⁶

Mary Torpy, inmate of the Good Shepherd Convent in Albany W.A. in 1899, found the ultimate escape. The coroner recorded a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind, finding that she must have thrown herself into the tub of boiling water intentionally.⁵⁷

One possibility for escapees was to seek refuge with Protestant anti-Romanists. The Rev. George Tregear, the leading Protestant critic of convents, claimed in 1918 to have sheltered eleven escapees, 'seven of whom lived in his home for some years.'⁵⁸ Some of them apparently became tired of life as exhibits.⁵⁹

Confinement was not permanent (except for some intellectually disabled girls who stayed on indefinitely), but the circumstances of leaving were sometimes not helpful for girls by then used to institutionalized living. According to one of the Forgotten Australians submissions:

These 6 girls spent 4 years or more working as UNPAID LABOURERS in the NUNS COMMERCIAL LAUNDRY [of the Good Shepherd convent, Ashfield]. When they neared their 18th birthday, they were called out

53 J. Konstantinidis, *Life in "The Mag"*, 2011, <http://nma.gov.au/blogsinside/2011/02/28/life-in-the-mag/>

54 <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/campbell-john-william-wallace-wal-12837>

55 *Plunged from Third Storey to Freedom: the stark truth of the "inside" of a Roman Catholic slave laundry as told by girls who escaped* (Protestant Publications, Glebe, 1982, reprinted from *The Rock* of 1948).

56 Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents*, 268; 'Archdeacon defends Magdalen Home', *Mercury* 1/9/1948, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/27755270>; 'Laundry conditions at Girls' Home', *Launceston Examiner* 4/9/1948, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/52647605>

57 'Suicide in a convent,' *Albany Advertiser* 16/11/1899, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/69895580>

58 'Protestantism', *Grenville Standard* 20/7/1918, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/119673099>

59 Catholic story of a return from Protestant exhibiting in 'Back to the convent,' *Freeman's Journal* 26/11/1908, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/111281150>.

of the workrooms, told to change their clothes, they were given a small suitcase which contained all their possessions, they were given £1.00 and shown the door. These girls were just dumped on the street just a few days before their 18th birthday, they were not given a chance to tell the other girls they were leaving.⁶⁰

(That conflicts with the statement of the Mother Prioress at Ashfield in 1954, that women who left the home to take jobs outside were given new clothing and a minimum of £30.⁶¹)



Machine room, Good Shepherd convent laundry, Ashfield, 1918
Good Shepherd Archives, Abbotsford

Where the girls came from

To understand experiences in the homes, it is necessary to have some idea of where the girls came from, what had happened to them and why they were confined there.

The visitor to Tempe in 1890 (when it still had more of the character of a refuge than a reformatory), reports:

60 *Australian Senate, Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children (2004)*, http://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/index, submission 93 (Report section 4.101).

61 'They get no pay but are mostly contented', *Sun-Herald* 12/9/1954.

I questioned a number of inmates very closely. I found that they were not light causes that the nuns had to deal with. Many of the women had led terrible lives—they had literally been rescued from the streets. Among the elder women I found that drink had, as might be expected, been a prime factor in their misery. Several of the young girls, however, had sad histories of deliberate seduction, which led one to regret that the punishment of flogging was not applicable to this crime.⁶²

Life outside on the streets was not ‘taking control of one’s sexuality’, as contemporary feminist mythology would have it.⁶³ A ‘fallen woman’ found in Little Bourke Street in 1895 by the Wesley Central Mission said ‘I will tell the Sister how dreadfully miserable I am; I hate my life; I was *once good and pure*, but look at me now ... *we have lost our name*, our honor, our character; we have lost all.’⁶⁴ (Not to mention the risks of assault and venereal diseases.)

Later, however, the girls forcibly confined in the homes often (though not always) came from backgrounds disturbed in other ways, a factor that needs to be taken into account when considering how they were dealt with and how they saw life in the homes. When poverty was endemic and before the era of the Pill, there were vast numbers of unwanted children, or children wanted but with parents unable to cope. The system of orphanages was overwhelmed by the numbers. Also, the phrase ‘wayward and intellectually disabled’ girls means what it says.⁶⁵ The numbers of the intellectually disabled were much larger than today, for reasons still not totally clear but including malnutrition, diseases like measles, industrial pollutants, assaults and physical accidents and child neglect.⁶⁶ Violence was widespread.

So the reasons for admittance to the Magdalen institutions are often a litany of extreme deprivations. Women were admitted to Abbotsford in the 1880s for, among other things, ‘larceny’, ‘insulting behaviour’, being ‘out at night with boys’, ‘neglected and associating with prostitutes’, ‘being found in a Chinese brothel’, ‘concealed birth and burial of her infant with the assistance of her foster parents’. Rose Hubbard, a fourteen-year-old orphan in 1885 with an artificial eye, was admitted to Oakleigh after burning down a house.⁶⁷

62 Taylor, ‘The Magdalen refuge at Tempe’.

63 J. Monk, *Cleansing their souls: laundries in institutions for fallen women*, *Lilith* 9 (1996), 21-32.

64 R. Howe and S. Swain, *The Challenge of the City: The Centenary History of Wesley Central Mission 1883-1993* (Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1993), 47, quoted in Monk, *Cleansing their souls*.

65 <http://mitchymemories.blogspot.com.au/2013/03/site-78-good-shepherd-convent-home-and.html>

66 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flynn_effect

67 Kovesi, 179-80.

Janice Konstantinidis, herself placed in Mount Saint Canice by a father she describes as ‘a sadistic alcoholic’, mentions a friend who had trouble with schoolwork: ‘She had been placed in the home because her parents were heavy drinkers and her mother had thrown her into a fire.’⁶⁸

No doubt more girls than realized at the time had been raped by their fathers. Rachael Romero from ‘The Pines’, who is perhaps the most bitter critic of the laundries, describes a background of physical and sexual abuse by her father.⁶⁹ Another Pines inmate had suffered rape by a neighbor.⁷⁰

An extreme example is Camelia M’Cluskey, who killed her three children with an axe in Bendigo in 1910. Found temporarily insane by the jury at her trial, she was confined in the Abbotsford Convent (from which she escaped by forcing a lock in 1911).⁷¹

The Melbourne papers of 1927 reported this case:

*Winnie O’Malley, a middle-aged woman, was charged at the Fitzroy Court on Monday with having at the Fitzroy watchhouse on the night of August 6, assaulted Agnes Dobbie ... Winnie O’Malley said:-I left the Abbotsford Convent on the day in question. I am willing to return for six months.*⁷²

Obviously, women and girls from with such disturbed histories arrived in many cases with psychological wounds that made them very hard to deal with. A Good Samaritan nun in 1947 wrote of her charges:

It is difficult to find even one vulnerable spot through which to appeal. The majority of them come under compulsion and they have no intention of settling down and no desire to be different.⁷³

Reports by outsiders

Although the convents were generally cut off from the outside world, there were visits of an official and journalistic nature which have left reports. They tend to be generally positive. The impression of the inmates from the visitor to Tempe in 1890 is:

They work hard from daylight till dark in the various divisions of the laundry, in

68 Konstantinidis, *Life in “The Mag”*.

69 <http://nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/2011/02/10/in-the-shadow-of-eden/>

70 <http://nma.gov.au/blogs/inside/2011/04/19/in-the-beginning/>

71 ‘Dun-Street tragedy revived,’ *Bendigo Advertiser* 13/6/1911, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/89848791>

72 ‘Assault in lock-up: Woman’s nose broken,’ *Argus* 9/8/1927, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3871747>

73 Sr Paula Cadusch, 1947, quoted in Walsh, *The Good Sams*, 190.

each of which a sister is always present with them. They receive no wages, yet they appear to be happy and contented. There can be no mistake as to the affectionate relationship between them and the sisters.⁷⁴

Visitors to the Industrial School attached to Abbotsford and to Oakleigh in 1902 report 'The children were all looking happy and contented' and 'the girls struck us as being very cheerful and happy.'⁷⁵ An unannounced visit to Abbotsford by the Charities Board of Victoria in 1923 found that in the laundry, 'Except in the case of a few unfortunates of obviously low mentality, the girls looked happier than one would expect, and all were clean and tidy.'⁷⁶ A visitor from the Children's Welfare Department writes to Mother Prioress at Oakleigh after a visit there in 1934, 'Yesterday I was particularly pleased with the whole content of the convent and with the healthy and contented appearance of practically all the girls I interviewed. I was also with a great deal of pleasure impressed with the love for the Sisters these girls had and their appreciation of what is being done for them.'⁷⁷

Such reports of brief visits need to be read while keeping in mind the possibility that some evidence was hidden. According to one former inmate, 'When the government came out you weren't allowed to tell them anything or you'd get belted.'⁷⁸ On the other hand, eyewitness reports by people whose specific job it was to inquire into conditions cannot be ignored.

Following the escape of two laundry workers aged 25 and 29 from the Good Shepherd Convent, Ashfield, in 1954 – they sustained bone fractures after dropping from knotted sheets⁷⁹ – the *Sun-Herald* sent two female reporters to the home, with the nuns' permission. They found 180 girls there, of whom 55 were there 'under restraint'. The 124 voluntary inmates included 24 auxiliary nuns, 65 adult women who were 'subnormal' and similar, and about 30 who were originally there involuntarily but had stayed on. The reporters found that 'The bright, airy dining-room has a warm, homely atmosphere', and observed tennis courts and an auditorium for picture shows. Mother Prioress regrets that all girls have to be

74 Taylor, 'The Magdalen Refuge at Tempe'.

75 *Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools, Report of the Secretary and Inspector for the year 1902*. (Good Shepherd Archives, Abbotsford; thanks to Fraser Faithfull for supplying).

76 Charities Board of Victoria, file on 'Abbotsford Female Refuge', Public Record Office file UPRS 4523/P1 Unit no. 149 file no. 1446, notes by Fraser Faithfull, Good Shepherd Archives, Abbotsford.

77 JRH, Children's Welfare Department, to Mother Prioress, Oakleigh, 22/11/1934, in Good Shepherd Archives, Abbotsford (thanks to Fraser Faithfull for supplying).

78 Schwartz, 'A local spin on the laundries of shame'.

79 'Says incident at convent "a thoughtless escapade"', *Courier-Mail* 28/8/1954, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/50587538>

confined at night as there is no separation between voluntary and involuntary inmates. The dormitories are described as seriously overcrowded and the reasons why all correspondence must be censored are reported without comment. After discussion with a large groups of girls without a nun present, the reporters conclude: The girls claim to be mostly happy; they expect that the nuns will find them a job when they leave (some in typing and nursing but mostly in domestic service); many are orphans and used to the comfort and security of having things done for them; they feel they don't need money.⁸⁰

The nuns' story

The story is incomplete without an understanding of the nuns' perspective. Writings on the topic so far have not made an effort to explain that perspective. That risks repeating the historical travesty of the Stolen Generations apology, where people who had never done anything for the worst-off in society tearfully apologized for the actions of others, such as patrol officers and missionaries, whose reasons for acting were carefully written out of the story.

Unfortunately, the nuns have not written their story themselves. Memoirs by nuns in Australia in general are very rare,⁸¹ and those few do not deal with the Magdalen asylums. The institutional histories of the orders, while informative, do not directly address the former inmates' allegations and say whether they believe them true or false. Requests to the Sisters of Charity and to the author of their institutional history for comment on that question for this article did not produce responses. The present-day Good Shepherd sisters have made an official statement (2013) that they are 'deeply sorry for acts of verbal or physical cruelty that occurred',⁸² but do not expand on that. So it is necessary to make some tentative inferences from a small amount of evidence.

The brief recollections by nuns that are available paint a very different picture from that of the inmates. Old Good Shepherd nuns commenting much later say: 'I worked in the packing room ... For me, working alongside the women and the fun we could have as we worked was a favourite memory.' 'It is strange to say that a favourite place was the laundry. I didn't like the work, especially the hotel guests' personal laundry – too much could go wrong ... but the whole place was full of life and energy and, mostly, good will. The packing room section of the laundry where I worked was highly organised, but not stuffy. I enjoyed the sense of connection with other Sisters and with the girls and women.' 'At Abbotsford I worked in several

80 'They get no pay but are mostly contented', *Sun-Herald* 12/9/1954; also Kovesi, 271.

81 J. Franklin, Memoirs by Australian priests, religious and ex-religious, *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 33 (2012), 142-162.

82 <https://www.goodshepherd.com.au/blog/good-shepherds-150-years> (2013); the nuns' process to deal with the abuse claims described in Kovesi 367-72.

sections of the laundry providing work place training for the girls and women which I enjoyed because the Sisters worked alongside them and it was a great time for building relationships and sharing their concerns and hopes for the future.⁸³

Those comments are a reminder that the nuns shared, even if on a voluntary or semi-voluntary basis, some of the conditions of the inmates, such as the bad food, the hard work, the confinement and the long periods of silence. One nun recalled, ‘we were working at midnight and I really thought [Sr] Vincent would die. Then we would get up at five, trying to get through the mountains of work ... it was terrible.’ From another, ‘we just slaved then, and it was very, very hard work ... We would start at 7am and work after tea as well, because we had taken on these big hotels.’⁸⁴ In one respect, the nuns enforced on themselves a discipline beyond that imposed on their charges – the grotesque, uncomfortable and constricting clothes.

The sisters had in general volunteered for an extremely rigid and controlled form of life – they were thus the opposite in personality to the ‘uncontrollable’ girls under their charge. A nun installed as Sister Assistant at Mount Saint Canice in 1962 was given a card saying, ‘You no longer have a will of your own because from now on the Superior’s will is your will as her Assistant.’⁸⁵

The attitude to obedience required of the nuns is illustrated by the address at Abbotsford in 1901 by a nun from the head house in France:

*You know what our Holy Rule says on this subject. It tells us how to act when we are reprov'd. We are to kneel down at once, Kiss the ground, and listen to what is said without reply or excuse. Mind, without reply or excuse, whether we are guilty or not.*⁸⁶

The women who volunteered for that kind of regime naturally regarded extreme discipline as in the best interests of their charges as well as themselves. The ‘uncontrollable’ women from the streets were the least likely kind of people to agree.

Nor were such women likely to agree with the nun’s model of success, especially in earlier years, which was that the inmates should be vividly penitent of their former sins and expire in the odour of sanctity.⁸⁷

Mutual incomprehension and hostility was increased by the rule of the Good

83 Sr Noeline White, Sr Pamela Molony and Sr Geraldine Mitchell, in Good Shepherd Action, pamphlet for Good Shepherd Festival Day, 2013 (supplied by Good Shepherd Archives).

84 Kovesi, *Pitch Your Tents*, 280.

85 Kovesi, 289.

86 Kovesi, 287.

87 Kovesi, 162-5.

Shepherd order that prevented inmates from discussing their past. So the nuns had no idea of what their inmates had been through. A nun explained decades later:

We didn't know one thing about them, which didn't make us as understanding as we could have been. I remember one day, a young girl was brought in – she would have been about fourteen or fifteen – and she was put on the mangle ... Well, after a while she got tired or something, I suppose, and she went away and sat somewhere else ... She was told to go straight back to the mangle. Now that child had been brought straight from having a miscarriage, and we didn't know. I had a little girl, she was a half-American negress, and I had to teach her. I didn't know that that little soul about twelve came to us from a maternity home. Well, you know, had you known, it would have altered my approach to them altogether. You'd have been more patient and more understanding ... See, we were taught ... that we were the nuns and we weren't allowed to even touch them. That made you sort of distant.⁸⁸

The nuns' model of what was right for both their clients and themselves was thus inherently a rigid and disciplined one that was unlikely to appeal to women brought under duress. There was no physical contact, and no emotional contact in the sense of listening to the girls' own concerns. The rules of the order enforced not only chastity but the lack of true or 'particular' friendship between nuns; nuns had a communal life but nuns did not go two by two. The vow of obedience, internally and externally imposed, could warp both those who took it on and those on whom obedience was imposed by force. It would not be surprising if some nuns' personalities became twisted, especially when added to chronic tiredness, lack of hormone replacement therapy and the like, and reacted with cruelty.

The accounts by both inmates and nuns of the unremitting hard work in the laundries are also a reminder that, like other institutions for the poor, they operated under the pressures of extreme lack of money. Like orphanages, they received almost no government funds, and the Protestant Federation applied pressure for further reductions to all such 'sectarian' charities⁸⁹ – it was regarded as the thin

88 Sr Felicitas Hanrahan SGS, 1995 interview, in Kovesi, 281.

89 'St Augustine's Orphanage: Dr Mannix attacks the Treasurer for reducing the grant', *Geelong Advertiser* 24/9/1921, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/119754241>; <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3744869>; 'Another glimpse of the cloven hoof', *Freeman's Journal* 1/7/1926, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/116776078>; 'Convents and orphanages: Protestant Federation's objections', *Chronicle* (Adelaide) 13/5/1922, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/87430005>.

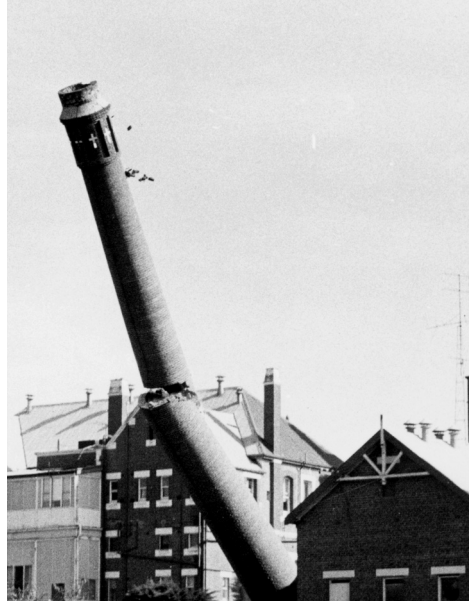
end of the wedge for state aid to denominational schools.⁹⁰ Although there were complaints from commercial launderers that the convents were using cheap labour to compete with union labour paid award wages, the industrial courts recognized that the convents took anyone as labour and barely paid their way.⁹¹ (It is true though that money could be found for some elaborate chapels and, at Abbotsford, a luxurious Bishop's Parlour.⁹²)

Conclusions

Three points need to be made.

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. They took in girls whom no-one else wanted and who were forcibly confined, contrary to the wishes of both the girls and the nuns. The girls came from a variety of very disturbed and deprived backgrounds and were individually hard to deal with in many cases. Dealing with them in the mass in large numbers was doubly difficult, since any significant proportion of uncontrollables in a group makes management and discipline extremely hard, as anyone who has lived in a boarding school knows. The budgets of the convents were minimal.

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



Demolition of the laundry chimney, St Aidan's Bendigo, 11 May 1986

90 'State aid barred', *The Watchman* 15/3/1923, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/112235848>; 'The war on the orphans', *Freeman's Journal* 15/3/1923, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/116731771>

91 <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/1442230>; 'The Victorian Protestant Federation: An Attack on Convent Laundries', *Freeman's Journal* 12/9/1918, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/116785928>; <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/15852379>; <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/116769770>; <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/115098015>; Walsh, *The Good Sams*, ch. 5.

92 <http://www.abbotsfordconvent.com.au/venues-hire/venues/bishop%E2%80%99s-parlour>

do not receive love early have difficulty perceiving positive human interactions. They understand human interactions differently – more negatively – from others. Those helping them are well aware that gratitude is not to be expected. For similar reasons, it has to be considered whether some former inmates might be blaming the convents for effects whose causes lie elsewhere and earlier. When ex-inmates found it difficult to fit into normal society and had trouble with relationships, it may be that the reasons for that lay as much in lack of parents and previous abuse as in what happened in the convents. As with the inmates of institutions generally such as orphanages, aboriginal missions, prisons and mental asylums, it could be asked whether those arriving from disturbed backgrounds involving a gross lack of love might see things more bleakly than those more fortunate.

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. If we just keep to the factual matters reported and leave aside matters of perception and later effects, there is both convergence of evidence from different sources and a clear picture of emotional abuse. As the *Forgotten Australians Report* rightly says, ‘The response that times were different and that standards and people’s thinking and understanding of children’s needs have changed, fails to explain or recognise the severity of the documented behaviours.’⁹³ It remains unexplained why so many individual nuns should have done that and why their culture supported it.

⁹³ *Forgotten Australians*, section 5.53.