

# THE MAGDALENES

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Prostitution in the nineteenth century

Linda Mahood

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LINDA MAHOOD

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For my Grandparents  
Bill and Verna Hoy

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Linda Mahood

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# Introduction

## *The deployment of 'dangerous' female sexualities*

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In 1986 an eminent Scottish historian wrote: 'The history of the family, and of child upbringing and the place of women within and without the home, is so neglected in Scotland as to verge on becoming a historiographic disgrace.'<sup>1</sup> At first glance a book which aspires to address this silence by focusing on prostitution must appear curious, to say the least. Today prostitution conjures up images of family breakdown, pornography, drugs, and most recently AIDS. But the relationship between prostitution and the social class and female gender roles which emerged within the mid-nineteenth-century social structure provides a particularly good opportunity to study some aspects of the experience of women in male-dominated society. This book examines four empirical and theoretical issues concerning prostitution in Scotland in the nineteenth century.

Beginning with the Scottish perspective and experience, this research arose initially out of an interest in the Contagious Diseases (C.D.) Acts which were enforced in parts of England and Ireland between 1864 and 1884. In her study of the impact of the Acts on Plymouth and Southampton, Judith Walkowitz argues that these 'technologies of power'<sup>2</sup> transformed the structure of prostitution in regulated towns. Her hypothesis raises interesting questions concerning prostitution in port and garrison towns and large industrial cities, such as those in Scotland, where the Acts were not enforced. Frances Finnegan's study of 'prostitutes' in York, during roughly the same period, for example, implies that the lives of York's 'prostitutes' were largely unaffected by the Acts; other evidence suggests that attacks on prostitution by moral reformers, evangelical philanthropists, and rescue workers before and after the introduction of the Acts was not without impact. Moral reformers<sup>3</sup> claimed

success in suppressing street soliciting and brothels throughout Britain in areas where the Acts were not enforced. The question arises, then, what happened in Scotland? Did the women labelled as 'prostitutes' remain relatively unharassed and unstigmatized? In pursuit of answers to these questions, it became clear that technologies of power, technologies not unlike the C.D. Acts themselves, were already in place in Scotland. Some, like the lock hospitals and magdalene asylums, existed long before the C.D. Acts were passed. Others, like the system of police repression which I call the 'Glasgow system', were developed as a reaction to the Acts. The historical interest of the Glasgow system is that it was not confined to Scotland, but was adopted as a model for similar systems of police repression in English cities, most notably in Manchester and Leeds as well as in Edinburgh and other Scottish towns.

As this research progressed, it became clear that the Glasgow system could not be studied as an isolated historical entity, and this brings us to the second issue examined in this book. The public discourse on prostitution in Scotland did not commence with the implementation of the C.D. Acts in England. Tracts and essays on the state of Scottish morals had been published with increasing regularity throughout the century. Similarly, Scottish lock wards and magdalene asylums, which were among the first in the United Kingdom, began to open around the turn of the century. A great deal of discursive terrain had been covered by the time the Glasgow system was developed in the 1870s. This book, therefore, traces the public discourse on prostitution as it emerged throughout the century.

The third issue is the technologies of power themselves. In this case these are apparatuses and institutions for the regulation, surveillance, and control of female sexuality. In particular, special emphasis is placed on magdalene homes in Glasgow and Edinburgh and a case study of the operation of the Glasgow system, which was composed of the Lock Hospital, Magdalene Institution and the Police Act (1866). As Jessica Evans points out, in most cases more is known about the clients, patients, and inmates of institutions than the interested institutions and discourses that are authorized to categorize them.<sup>4</sup>

In the nineteenth century interest groups in industrial cities throughout the United Kingdom were increasingly dissatisfied with the role of the police, prisons, and poorhouses in controlling young

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female misdemeanants, paupers, and orphans. Moral reformers were critical of the state institutions and the penal system for the part they played in 'hardening' young female offenders, particularly those charged with sexual misconduct. They argued that the traditional practice of bringing women charged with sexual offences before the court and subjecting them to prison sentences aided their corruption. Reformers did not object, however, to detaining 'fallen' women provided that they were not incarcerated with 'criminals'. Their solution was to establish non-statutory female penitentiaries, to entice these women into direct care early in their careers and to personally supervise their moral reformation. This involved persuading a woman to commit herself to long periods of voluntary incarceration in a magdalene home, where she would be subjected to moral education and industrial training, and expected to conform to middle-class standards of femininity. The moral reform activities in Scotland in the nineteenth century provide a unique opportunity to examine the process whereby local state representatives and philanthropists working on behalf of the state established, or gained control of, existing apparatuses designed for the social control and moral reform of women who defied middle-class standards of sexual and vocational propriety.

The final issue examined is the social construction of one 'dangerous' female sexuality. This is not an empirical study of 'prostitutes' and prostitution *per se*, but raises the more general question of the moral regulation of working-class female sexuality. In relation to class, it is argued that working-class women were overwhelmingly the targets of legislation designed to clean up street disorders, which the bourgeoisie perceived as plaguing their cities' streets. Following recent contributions to the literature on the history of sexuality, it is suggested that working-class sexuality was increasingly the object of middle-class scrutiny and attempts at colonization.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary discourses and apparatuses did not address the working class directly, however, but appeared to divide the population up on other grounds, by singling out specific objectionable sexual characters and certain behaviours. What are apparently non-class-based characters emerge. However, on closer examination we find that these characters were mobilized in class- and gender-specific ways. It is significant that it was, by and large, working-class women whose behaviours were scrutinized and stigmatized. For a brief period efforts were made in Glasgow to reach a 'better' class

of girl, who the directors of the Magdalene Institution believed existed to cater to upper-class men. After a notable lack of success this was abandoned and the institution concluded that no such women existed in the city. Furthermore, there was no suggestion that 'prostitutes' might ever be male. Discussions of the sexual behaviour of male clients remained marginal to the public discourse. Basically then, public attention and initiative was overwhelmingly directed at one section of the urban population: specifically, working-class women.

Studies of the sexual behaviour of the Victorians have become considerably more sophisticated since the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> It has been accepted that contemporary sexual practices fell short of the ideal moral code to which the Scottish establishment paid lip-service.<sup>7</sup> Recent studies of pornography, illegitimacy, drunkenness, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism, and prostitution have successfully challenged the assumption of a unitary Victorian culture and a single repressive standard of sexual behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Of these, studies which address the question of prostitution directly can be loosely divided into three paradigms: the double standard model, the oppression model, and the problematization model.

Beginning with the double standard model; the belief that unchastity – in the form of premarital or extramarital sex – is pardonable for a man, but a matter of grave importance for a woman, is generally known as the double standard. At its most basic, the ideology of the double standard suggests that the high standard of premarital chastity placed on middle-class couples in the nineteenth century meant that men were forced to resort to 'prostitutes' in order to preserve the virtue of women of their own class. After marriage, 'model' wives were expected to turn a blind eye to their husband's extramarital liaisons. This is an essentialist view of human sexuality, which argues that while sexual desire was virtually absent in middle-class women, it was rampant in men. 'Respectable' women were instructed to regard the act of procreation as a necessary, shameful, and repulsive duty; men, on the other hand, were encouraged to regard sex as the part of marriage which existed entirely for their pleasure.<sup>9</sup> The central problem for Victorian males was how to combine sexual freedom for men with chastity for their women. The solution lay in prostitution, where working-class girls and non-virtuous or 'fallen' women were sacrificed so that the wives

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and daughters of the upper classes could remain chaste and pure-minded.<sup>10</sup>

In an attempt to establish a causal relationship between the double standard and prostitution, historians who use this model provide it with a plausible biological and psychological basis by using Freud's dissociation theory. Freud argued that the universal characteristic of 'civilized' men was their inability to feel love and sensuality for the same person; in this case, married men were incapable of obtaining sexual satisfaction from their wives, for whom they felt only tenderness, affection, and esteem. Sexual satisfaction could only be experienced with women of a 'lower social order'. In contrast, the sexual elements of affection and sensuality were aroused simultaneously in 'healthy' women. In cases where dissociation did occur, it was usually expressed in the form of frigidity or occasionally produced 'Lady-Chatterley-like' situations. It follows then that a woman's infidelity would be considered far more serious than a man's. The chief problem with this approach lies in its explanation of the origin of the double standard as being rooted in biology or psychology. The concept of the double standard itself can be useful and its existence cannot be denied, but it must be seen as an historical and social construct.<sup>11</sup>

Finnegan's study of prostitution in York typifies the oppression model. She argues that studies of prostitution frequently concentrate on the institutional aspects of Victorian prostitution rather than on the 'prostitutes' themselves and the biting poverty which drove them to prostitution. She demonstrates that prostitution did not fit the double standard model of middle-class demand and working-class supply. Her empirical data indicate that 73 per cent of the men reported as associating with 'prostitutes' belonged to the working class.<sup>12</sup> Her analysis of court and poor-law records, local newspapers, and hospital and penitentiary reports suggests that the main characteristic of prostitution was not simply the exploitation of one class by another, but the sexual exploitation of indigent women by all classes of men. She concludes that 'prostitutes' were generally working-class women who were forced into prostitution by destitution, poor wages, and lack of employment opportunities; conditions which were the consequences of exploitative class relations.

The pitfall of the oppression model involves the question of agency. By defining women as passive victims of male oppression, Finnegan fails to recognize women as full historical agents capable



of making their own history. This is most evident when compared to Walkowitz's study of prostitution in Plymouth and Southampton, which has taken up similar sources yet reached significantly different conclusions. Walkowitz opposes the portrayal of 'prostitutes' as silent victims of social injustice and male oppression.<sup>13</sup> Instead, she portrays them as important historical actors, as women trying to survive in towns that offered them only poor wages and unsteady employment. Their move into prostitution was neither pathological nor deviant but a rational choice given their limited opportunities.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the double standard model, which focuses on the relationship between male sexuality and the demand for 'prostitutes', and the oppression model, which emphasizes the sexual exploitation of working-class women, the problematization model<sup>15</sup> locates prostitution within the larger social, economic, and institutional structures of the nineteenth century. By conceptualizing prostitution at this level it is possible to perceive contradictions which shaped the market economy of prostitution (poor wages, unemployment, and class prejudices), while at the same time to examine how changing cultural processes, like the double standard, influenced the problematization of prostitution in the nineteenth century.

Unlike the first two models, problematization theorists do not regard labels such as 'prostitution' or 'prostitute' as valid observational categories. They argue that prostitution, like other forms of sexual behaviour, acquired a new meaning in the nineteenth century. Foucault, for example, argues that sexuality is an historical construct. He claims that the nineteenth century was characterized by the 'deployment of sexualities': the attempt to identify and classify diverse forms of human sexuality,<sup>16</sup> notably the 'hysterical' woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the homosexual. His argument can be applied to the 'prostitute', which he does not directly examine.

Other theorists working within the problematization paradigm argue that the image of the 'prostitute' possessed a wide cultural currency and occupied a symbolic place in the class and gender hierarchy of the nineteenth century. Walkowitz argues that the 'prostitute' was 'simultaneously an object of class guilt as well as fear, a powerful symbol of economic exploitation under industrial capitalism'.<sup>17</sup> Shifting the emphasis, Erna Hellerstein, Leslie Parker, and Karen Offen claim that the symbol of the 'prostitute' was used