# The Rape of Mary M.: A Microhistory of Sexual Violence and Moral Redemption in 1920s Ireland

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Moate
Co. Westmeath
3 July 1924

My Lord,

May it please your grace to spare me a few moments of your most valuable time. To each other we are perfect strangers but I appeal to your charity to listen to my pitiful tale and beg your forgiveness if I seem to intrude.

During the Political trouble when looting and robbing & raiding were carried on to such an extent in our country district my trouble began. In January 1923 a party of men armed to the teeth & calling themselves Republicans forced their entrance into our house where in three people resided. My Aunt who is totally blind and is over 70 years, my Uncle 70 and I their neice an orphan. The object of their visit was money or lives. When I strove to save my Aunt from being dragged from her bed and they were furious when they did not get money one brute satisfied his duty passion on me. I was then in a dangerous state of health and thro' his conduct I became Pregnant. Oh God could any pen describe what I have gone thro'.

LYING AMID A COLLECTION OF thousands of "charity case" letters in the Dublin Diocesan Archives is an eight-page letter written by a rural Irish woman in July 1924 to the Roman Catholic archbishop of Dublin, Edward J. Byrne (1921–40), seeking assistance.[1] In many respects this letter

[1] Mary M., Moate, Co. Westmeath, to Archbishop Byrne, Archbishop's Palace, Drumcondra Co. Dublin, 3 July 1924, AB 7, Charity Cases, box 1, 1921–26, Byrne Papers, Dublin Diocesan Archives (cited hereafter as DDA). All quotes in the text are from this document. All spelling, punctuation, and syntax have been reproduced exactly as they appear

*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 24, No. 1, January 2015

DOI: 10.7560/JHS24104

is similar to the hundreds before and after it in the collection: the author was in need of financial assistance and made her claims on the basis of her fidelity to the Roman Catholic Church.[2] The majority of people who wrote to the archbishop refer to problems relating to poverty, unemployment, illness, or bereavement, but a small minority wrote about more sensitive problems concerning, for example, illegitimacy or incest.[3] Mary M.'s letter, quoted above, fits into this smaller cohort; she was in need of financial help to resolve a moral problem. In keeping with the rules of the archbishop's system, she supplied a religious referee, the name of a Franciscan, Father Cyprian.[4] His two short letters are the only other surviving papers relating to her case.[5]

In her letter, Mary M. described the most intimate of "troubles" and balanced the dictates of decorum with the needs of her situation. She was an unmarried mother who was the main caregiver for her elderly blind aunt and uncle, and she wrote to the archbishop to request financial assistance to secure her son's future. He was conceived, she explained, as a result of rape during the Irish Civil War (1922–23).[6] In the process of enlisting the archbishop's assistance, she outlined the trajectory that her life had taken since she discovered she was pregnant. She had concealed this knowledge from everyone close to her, apart from the Franciscan who had acted as her confidant and referee. As her pregnancy progressed, she traveled to Dublin, where she was directed to a Catholic rescue agency. On the advice of this agency, she forged a plan to return to Dublin just before her delivery to give birth in the National Maternity Hospital in Holles Street, where she planned to hand over the infant to the rescue agency and return to her life in County Westmeath. She wrote to the archbishop nine months after leaving her son in the rescue agency because she could no longer afford the fees for her son's maintenance, and she

in this letter. For a biography of the archbishop, see Thomas J. Morrissey, *Edward J. Byrne, 1872–1941: The Forgotten Archbishop of Dublin* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2010).

[2] There are two collections of charity case letters held in the Dublin Diocesan Archives, one (uncataloged) containing letters written to Archbishop Edward J. Byrne and one (cataloged) containing letters written to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (1941–72).

[3] Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin, 1922–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 75–82.

[4] "Father Cyprian" is a pseudonym to protect the identity of Mary M.'s son. The priest who helped Mary M. was born Patrick D. in 1879 in West Limerick, Ireland, and he entered the Franciscan Order in 1895. See *Obituaries: Province of Ireland 1900–2012* (Dublin, 2012). I am grateful to Joseph MacMahon, OFM, for this information.

[5] Fr. Cyprian, OFM, the Abbey, Galway, to Fr. Dunne (the archbishop's secretary), 8 July 1924, AB 7, Charity Cases, box 1, 1921–26, Byrne Papers, DDA.

[6] The Irish Civil War began on 28 June 1922 when government troops attacked the headquarters of the Irregulars (those opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, also known as the antitreaty IRA). The Irregulars carried out a guerrilla war against the protreaty forces. A ceasefire was called on 30 April 1923, and on 4 May 1923 the IRA ordered its men to dump arms. By January 1923, when Mary M. was raped, the IRA was mostly in hiding and roaming the Irish countryside.

feared that unless she raised twenty pounds to pay the agency to arrange the private adoption of her son, he would be returned to her, exposing her as an unmarried mother.

Historians have written enough about how sexuality was perceived in 1920s Ireland for us to know that Mary M.'s fears were not unfounded.[7] Extensive examinations of newspapers, religious sources, and court records have made it clear that a stringent moral code that deemed sexual contact outside of marriage to be immoral enshrined a sexual double standard that generally led to social ostracism and/or institutionalization of sexually "deviant" women.[8] However, we know relatively little about how private individuals negotiated moral and sexual codes or how theory and practice collided and were reconciled. The nuances of that lived experience often elude the historian, as sources that might shed light upon such a complex area have rarely been deposited in the archives, with the notable exception of court cases involving sexual violence, which are heavily shaped by the dynamics of the legal system and the drama of the courtroom. Internationally, there has been some impressive work on the history of sexual violence.[9] In the Irish context, Sandra McAvoy, Eoin O'Sullivan, and Seán Keating all provide insights into the impact of social convention on discourses about sexual violence, which shaped the translation of that experience in the public arena.[10] The work of Clíona Rattigan and Elaine

[7] See, for example, Anthony Bradley and Maryann Valiulis, eds., *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Tom Inglis, "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland," *Éire-Ireland* 40, nos. 3 and 4 (2005): 9–38; Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Maryann Valiulis, ed., *Gender and Power in Irish History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009); James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

[8] Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, 172–220; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*; Maria Luddy, "Unmarried Mothers in Ireland, 1880–1973," *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1 (February 2011): 109–26; and Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries.* J. Redmond argues that a general social concern regarding sinfulness was particularly focused on single women. See J. Redmond, "'Sinful Singleness'? Exploring the Discourses on Irish Single Women's Emigration to England, 1922–1948," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 3 (2008): 456–57.

[9] Elisabeth D. Heineman, ed., *Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: From the Ancient World to the Era of Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2007); Elisabeth J. Wood, "Variation in Sexual Violence in War," *Politics and Society* 34 (2006): 307–41; Shani D'Cruze, "Approaching the History of Rape and Sexual Violence: Notes towards Research," *Women's History Review* 1, no. 3 (1992): 377–97; Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston, 1880–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988); Anna Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770–1845* (London: Pandora, 1987).

[10] Sandra McAvoy, "Sexual Crime and Irish Women's Campaign for a Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1912–35," in Valiulis, *Gender and Power*, 84–99; Eoin O'Sullivan, "'This

Farrell has done much to reconstruct the experiences of single mothers accused of infanticide.[11] However, as Rattigan acknowledges, we have rarely heard the voices of single mothers because they left few "records of their own."[12]

Mary M.'s letter is a very rare first-person account of an "ordinary" woman's experiences of rape, unmarried motherhood, and spiritual torment.[13] Her story offers an ideal opportunity to undertake a microhistorical analysis of the agency of a woman who found herself trapped in circumstances that placed her at odds with the moral dictates of her society. Her letter provides a map of personal agency and allows us to track her journey from rape to pregnancy to "rescue." This article highlights the ways in which Mary M. is an historical "normal exception," representing both a normal example of unmarried motherhood and a significant exception.[14] In a broad sense, Mary M.'s predicament was one experienced by hundreds of single Irish women in 1920s Ireland: an unmarried mother, alone, forced to negotiate a solution to her situation in secret by relying on the limited bargaining power her position afforded her within her religion. Inevitably, aspects of her own unique experience were exceptional; however, her rape is the most obvious feature of her story that marks her out from the majority of unmarried mothers. Her profile and experience will be carefully delineated and analyzed in order to appreciate the extent and limitations of her power, the cultural values embedded in her story, and the impact of gender and faith on her decision-making process and emotional framework. A careful (re)construction of Mary M.'s story serves to highlight that the individual in history can be resurrected to heighten our historical understanding of broader patterns and the unique "otherness" of each protagonist, an approach that respects the complexity of experiences like rape and unwanted pregnancy.[15]

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Otherwise Delicate Subject': Child Sexual Abuse in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland," in *Criminal Justice in Ireland*, ed. Paul O'Mahony (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2002), 172–202; Seán Keating, "Sexual Crime in the Irish Free State 1922–23: Its Nature, Extent and Reporting," *Irish Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (May 2012): 135–55.

[11] Clíona Rattigan, *"What Else Could I Do?": Single Mothers and Infanticide, 1900–1950* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012); Elaine Farrell, *"A Most Diabolical Deed": Infanticide and Irish Society, 1850–1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

[12] Rattigan, *"What Else Could I Do?,"* 24.

[13] I adopt Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon's definition of "ordinary" here: "those who led their lives at a remove from the power centers of society and played no direct part in the decisions that affected its form and development" ("Social History—Cultural History—Alltagsgeschichte—Microhistory: In-Between Methodologies and Conceptual Frameworks," *Journal of Microhistory*, 2006, 1, http://microhistory.org/?e=34&w=journal-of-microhistory-2006, accessed 25 June 2014).

[14] The term "normal exception" is from Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, "'The Singularization of History': Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge," *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 701–35, esp. 710.

[15] Zoltán Boldizár Simon, "Method and Perspective," *Journal of Microhistory*, 2009, 1–10, 2.

## The Woman and Her "Epistolary Self"

Mary M.'s letter was an attempt to draw her church into providing a solution to her predicament, and it thus represented what Rebecca Earle has called a "site of epistolary self-creation"; she presented a version of herself to secure the assistance she required.[16] Mary M. needed to create an identity that was morally unquestionable and trustworthy, and to do this she had to engage with the complex mores of her society and faith. The fact that she struggled with the crafting of the letter and that she feared she might fail to convince becomes apparent when halfway through she wrote: "Would to God I had words to make you understand how a nature like mine bends under such a burden." Appealing to the archbishop's sense of charity, she asked him "to spare me a few moments of your most valuable time . . . to listen to my pitiful tale." Her use of the word "listen" rather than "read" highlights the intimacy of the story she was about to tell and underscores the simultaneous distance and proximity a letter afforded her and the archbishop. They had no relationship other than the distant formal one of the church and this intimate, possibly inappropriate, letter: "To you my Lord it may seem almost unpardonable that I write but each time I kneel before the S[acred] Heart it speaks to me of you. I don't even know your name My Lord."[17] He was the "perfect stranger" because the Sacred Heart bound them in a confessional relationship.

Mary M. offered "Fr. Cyprian based in the Abbey in Galway" as her religious referee, reassuring the archbishop: "Should you doubt one word of what I tell you Lord write to Revd. Father Cyprian" and "he will tell you word for word all I am after telling you & perhaps lay bare to you my circumstances."[18] It was, of course, impossible that her letter could have been retold "word for word," but the idea helped to emphasize its inherent truth. Lies must be scripted, the truth has its own innate language: "Every word I told you is perfectly true." Father Cyprian fulfilled his brief and testified, "I do really think she is a genuine case, and if his Grace can help her in any way it would be a very great charity." According to Father Cyprian, she wrote "of her own accord" and after months of struggle: "I know she has struggled hard for a long time back to have the child nourished but I believe she has now reached the end of her resources & is reduced to terrible straits—if not to desperation."[19]

[16] Rebecca Earle, "Letters, Writers and the Historian," in *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600–1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 2.

[17] Liz Stanley has noted that letters can construct and reflect a relationship between writer and recipient ("The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondence," *Auto/Biography* 12 [2004]: 201–35, 211).

[18] Father Cyprian was guardian of the Franciscan Abbey in Athlone, county Westmeath, between 1921 and 1924. In 1924 he was moved to the Abbey in Galway (*Obituaries: Province of Ireland 1900–2012*).

[19] Cyprian to Dunne, 8 July 1924.

In Mary M.'s narrative, her rape and subsequent pregnancy represented a rupture in a religiously exemplary life: "When I compare my life now with a couple of years past I can't believe I am the same person." She had been "brought up well and came of decent parents R.I.P. I was a child of Mary a member of St Francis 3rd Order besides been a weekly Communicant." She thus claimed Roman Catholic charity on the basis of having been respectable, orphaned, devout, and observant of religious duty. The Franciscan Third Order, later the Secular Franciscan Order, catered both to people who wished to live as religious—those who had taken vows—and to those laypeople who did not take vows but who wished to live in the spirit of Saint Francis.[20] As Mary M. was a member of the order, she had undergone a year of "formation" followed by profession; she would have attended regular meetings, recited daily prayers, and endeavored to live a Christian life. She had therefore demonstrated serious commitment to her faith. However, her violent impregnation had taken the faith she so desperately needed from her: "Now there is no thought for there [the church] in my heart only my one terrible misery." The emphasis placed on religious devotion was hardly surprising considering the intended reader; however, Mary M.'s letter indicates that her faith was pivotal in constructing her sense of guilt, providing context for her feelings of shame, and offering her the chance of redemption. How she described her faith should not be read merely as a ploy to exact charity; it was also the context for her life and how she understood what had happened to her. She had been tested and in her "agonies" had "fallen" and was now being "punished."

She noted on two occasions that she was an orphan, which conjured the most vulnerable of images. Yet this was no waif-child writing. The censuses of 1901 and 1911 and her birth certificate provide three different ages, but they all place her in her late thirties or early forties at the time of her rape.[21] She made no attempt to articulate her age, to stress that she was a middle-aged woman subjected to a violent sexual ordeal and forced to brave the hazards of a pregnancy in later life. Either she believed the image of her as a girl was more conducive to sympathy or she did not consider her age a central factor in her experience or her need. As an unmarried woman in rural Ireland she would have maintained the status of a girl irrespective of age, a term that carried with it assumptions of innocence, vulnerability, and impotency.[22] This is confirmed by the fact that Father Cyprian, who knew her, referred to her as a girl in his letters.

[20] Patrick Conlan, "The Secular Franciscans," in *The Irish Franciscans 1534–1990,* ed. Edel Bhreathnach, Joseph MacMahon, and John McCafferty (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 260–70.

[21] Her birth was registered as 23 August 1880, making her forty-three in January 1923. However, according to the 1901 and 1911 censuses, she would have been forty-two or thirty-eight in January 1923.

[22] On the status of unmarried middle-aged men and women in rural Ireland during this period, see Mary E. Daly, *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1920–1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 70–73.

She was, however, an orphan.[23] Her maternal aunt and two uncles (all unmarried) had taken her and her three younger siblings in, and they had all resided in the modest farmstead in Moate until at least 1901.[24] She was described as a "scholar" in the 1901 census and, as she was roughly nineteen, it is likely that she had attended a convent secondary school.[25] The Child of Mary sodality, a lay religious group organized through the parish that met weekly for prayer, which she mentioned as part of her Roman Catholic résumé, was largely made up of girls in convent education. By 1911 all her siblings had departed, and she resided alone as the main caregiver of her then aged blind aunt: "Thro' my Aunts blindness I'm bound here and can't go out to work."[26] Mary M.'s profile as a middle-aged spinster, caring for her elderly relatives in a rural farmstead, conforms to the experience of many Irish women; by 1926 40 percent of Irish women between thirty-five and forty-four years of age were unmarried.[27] While she was better educated than many of her contemporaries, her life prospects do not seem to have been greatly altered by that reality—she was a caregiver with no public job. However, while her profile conforms to the "normal," her experience—the fact that she was raped during the Irish Civil War—makes her an exception.

## The Meaning and Context of Rape

Mary M. situated her narrative at the heart of the Irish Civil War, and her story thus presents a challenge to much of the historiography regarding that conflict and the alleged absence of sexual violence.[28] Personal accounts of the Irish revolutionary period in memoirs, letters, and diaries rarely contain references to sex or sexual violence.[29] Mary M.'s rape is one of only four documented incidents when IRA gangs were alleged or proven to have

[23] According to the death register, her mother died in 1892 at age thirty-five of typhus; her father died in 1906 at age fifty-two in the Athlone workhouse hospital of chronic Bright's disease (acute nephritis).

[24] The farmhouse had a thatched roof, three rooms, and three front windows and was classified as a second-class dwelling in the census of 1901.

[25] She benefited from the revolution in girls' secondary education between 1880 and 1914. By 1914 only England, Wales, and Norway had more girls in secondary education than Ireland. See Eileen Breathnach, "Women and Higher Education in Ireland (1879–1914)," *Crane Bag* 4, no. 1 (1980): 47–54.

[26] In the 1911 census she was described as a boarder, but she was in fact a caregiver.

[27] *Census of Population, 1926*, 5:24–25.

[28] Few scholars have actually examined sexual or gendered violence during the revolutionary period (1916–23) in any detail, with the exception of Benton, Lynch, Matthews, and Ryan. However, all four focus primarily on the War of Independence. See Sarah Benton, "Women Disarmed: The Militarisation of Politics in Ireland, 1913–1923," *Feminist Review* 50 (1995): 148–72; Robert Lynch, "Explaining the Altnaveigh Massacre," *Éire-Ireland* 45, nos. 3 and 4 (2010): 184–210; Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women, 1900–1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2010), 266–79; and Louise Ryan, "'Drunken Tans': Representation of Sex and Violence in the Anglo-Irish War, 1919–21," *Feminist Review* 66 (2000): 74.

[29] Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 74, 86; Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, 93–99.

been involved in a rape or sexual assault between 1921 and 1926.[30] There is little doubt that the atmosphere of violence and disorder exposed women in domestic settings to considerable fear, intimidation, gender violence, and assault.[31] However, contemporaries, and historians since, are less sure about the degree to which that violence was sexual in nature or intent. Several reports during the War of Independence (1919–21) noted the impact of the conflict on women in the home.[32] The British Labor Party reported on conditions in Ireland, claiming that "the agents of the British government often act in a way which is terrifying to women." But the report also noted that it was "extremely difficult to obtain direct evidence of incidents affecting females, for the women of Ireland are reticent on such subjects."[33] The *Interim Report of the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland* noted the frequency with which "the sanctity of the family home is violated."[34] This is supported by other more private sources, for example, Mr. Michael G. wrote to the archbishop of Dublin explaining that he had been "left Pennyless and wricked by the Black and tans my wife is in bad health sence through the raids my house was raided 14 times they pulled my wife out of bed before her conferment and abused her and threatened her life."[35]

The historiography of the Irish War of Independence has largely supported the contemporary tendency to juxtapose the sexually malevolent portrayal of the British Black and Tans with a "desexualized image of [Irish] Republicanism."[36] However, if, as Joanna Bourke convincingly argues, "rape and sexual violence are deeply rooted in *specific* political, economic and cultural environments," then Mary M.'s story must be historically contextualized with attention to the identities of her attackers.[37] The fact that she described them as men "calling themselves Republicans" indicates that she was aware of the widespread anxiety that in the chaos of the Civil War wandering gangs of men were either masquerading as Republicans or

[30] Pádraig Yeates notes that "one formal complaint of rape was made" against the IRA by a Protestant farmer's wife who was gang raped during the truce (July–December 1921) (*A City in Turmoil: Dublin 1919–21* [Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2012], 178). In July 1922 a question was posed in the House of Commons regarding the rape of a farmer's wife in Tipperary by "sinn feiners" ("Outrage, Tipperary," House of Commons, Debate, 11 July 1922, vol. 156, cols. 1027–28, 1027. (I am grateful to Dr. Marie Coleman for alerting me to this reference.) Keating refers to the gang rape of a Mayo woman by an IRA active service unit in 1926 ("Sexual Crime," 147).

[31] There is little doubt that women experienced gender-specific violence during the Irish revolution, for example, the cutting of their hair and the dowsing of their night garments in cold water (Wood, "Variation," 335n3).

[32] Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 87.

[33] Ibid., 78.

[34] Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 143.

[35] Mr. Michael G. Crossmalena, county Mayo, to Archbishop Byrne, 28 January 1924, AB 7, Charity Cases, box 1, 1921–26, Byrne Papers, DDA.

[36] Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 87.

[37] Bourke, *Rape*, 7.

forfeiting the right to call themselves honorable Republicans by terrorizing the countryside. Numerous regional studies of the history of the Civil War confirm that the general atmosphere of violence provided a cover for criminal gangs to carry out theft or for disgruntled locals to settle land disputes, making it very difficult to isolate violence directly related to the war.[38] Irish regional papers carried regular reports of raids on farmsteads and isolated homes, and during the month that Mary M.'s home was raided, the *Connacht Tribune* reported on "a gang of marauders" who had been targeting homes "mainly occupied by defenseless people."[39] The nature of the war destroyed the social conventions of the public and private sphere: the home was compromised as a private domain by the fact that many were used as safe houses to hide men or weapons, transforming the home into a potential site of resistance and, therefore, a target for raids and searches. Domestic security thus was an illusion that was shattered daily.[40] The *Westmeath Independent*, Mary M.'s regional paper, quoted the text of Cardinal Logue's lamentations in the Lenten Pastoral of February 1923: "Now, God help us, the plague of bloodshed, destruction, pillage, rapine, robbery, even sordid theft, has invaded, at least, a part of the archdiocese, with a virulence which leaves in the shade even the most outrageous excesses of the Black-and-Tans."[41] "Sordid theft" more than likely referred to the violence that women and families were subjected to during these raids.

On 3 March 1923, two months after the attack on Mary M., the *Westmeath Independent* carried a story entitled "Westmeath Woman's Ordeal, Scene in Devlin Hotel," in which a female housekeeper had been terrorized by men claiming to be gathering money for the IRA. These reports focused on the violence that women were subjected to, but any sexual element was either not alluded to or heavily coded. Keating notes that press reports obscured the sexual nature of offenses to the point where "the nature of the crime was barely discernible."[42] For example, the brutal murder of a young woman that occurred only a few months after Mary M.'s rape was reported as follows in the *Westmeath Independent*: "It is evident that she was attacked on her way home, and she resisted her attacker

[38] See, for example, Oliver Coogan, *Politics and War in Meath 1913–1923* (Dublin: Folens, 1983); Michael Farry, *The Aftermath of Revolution: Sligo 1921–23* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), 164–75; Michael Farry, "Revolution and Terry in Kildare, 1919–1923," in *Terror in Ireland, 1916–1923*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012), 194–205; Francis J. Costello, *The Irish Revolution and Its Aftermath 1916–1923: Years of Revolt* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003); and Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

[39] "Callous Conduct: Extraordinary Story of Brutality from Crannagh, Gort," *Connacht Tribune*, 20 January 1923.

[40] See, for example, Helen Litton and Kathleen Clarke, eds., *Revolutionary Woman* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2008); Matthews, *Renegades*, 266–82.

[41] "Lenten Pastorals, Lawlessness Condemned, Bishop's Grave Warnings to the People," *Westmeath Independent*, 11 February 1923.

[42] Keating, "Sexual Crime," 136.

or attackers, and that she was frightfully maltreated, her left eye being practically torn from its socket, and nearly all her teeth knocked out. . . . At the inquest the jury found that the deceased was murdered by a person unknown when defending her honor."[43] The reference to her "defending her honor" is the only indication that this was a sexual attack, during which the victim was murdered.

The language of sexuality, and particularly the words used to describe sexual assault, offers the historian considerable clues regarding how contemporaries understood sex and its relationship to morality. The term "outrage," for example, was often a euphemism for physical and sexual assault while also being adopted to cover more general violence. The use of this term to describe (and obfuscate) sexual assault hints at the contemporary sense and emphasis on moral outrage rather than an understanding of the devastation of sexual violation. In November 1922, the *Irish Times* reported on the murder of a woman who "had apparently struggled desperately in an endeavor to frustrate an attempted outrage."[44] Ryan points out that the reporting of the "Lixnaw Outrage" in the *Cork Examiner* in October 1920 initially noted only that a Miss O'Grady was dragged from her bed in the middle of the night and had her hair cut off. However, a report of the following day hinted more strongly at a sexual element to the attack. It noted that the woman was also stripped of her nightclothes and thrown into a pool of cold water before her hair was cut off.[45] The 14 April 1921 edition of the *Irish Bulletin* also used the term "outrage" to denote rape and was entitled "Outrages on Irishwomen." It was published in response to British claims that "no outrages on [Irish] women had been committed by British forces" and included one clear description of rape during a nighttime raid by the Black and Tans.[46] In July 1922 Winston Churchill, as colonial secretary, was questioned in the House of Commons regarding an attack by "Sinn Feiners" on the house of a "Loyalist in Tipperary." Clearly referring to rape, he noted that the assailants had set about "one by one to outrage the wife of the owner."[47] Robert Lynch, in his examination of the Altnaveigh Massacre of June 1922, quotes reports on the gang rape of Mrs. McGuill in Dromintree, County Armagh, that used words like "revolting outrage."[48] While Lynch accepts that "sexually motivated violence was rare during the

[43] "Brutal Northern Murder: Young Lady Beaten to Death," *Westmeath Independent*, 7 April 1923.

[44] "Kicked to Death: Woman's Long Struggle with Assailant," *Irish Times*, 3 November 1922.

[45] Ryan, "'Drunken Tans,'" 79.

[46] The *Irish Bulletin* was the official organ of Dáil Éireann (the Irish parliament) and was published between July 1919 and December 1921. It was obviously a propaganda tool, but I am interested here in the use of the term "outrage" to denote rape rather than the veracity of the claims themselves. See "Outrages on Irishwomen," *Irish Bulletin*, 14 April 1921.

[47] "Outrage, Tipperary."

[48] Lynch, "Explaining," 198.

Irish Revolution [1916–23]," he argues that "sexual and other attacks on women may have been more prevalent in Northern Ireland than the record shows and less exceptional than the revisionist interpretation argues."[49] There is little doubt that evidence regarding rape during war varies considerably from conflict to conflict, and, as Elisabeth Wood argues, this variation is "real and not solely an artifact of bias in reporting and observation or a reflection of variation in peacetime levels."[50] While, as Sarah Benton has noted, there is no evidence to suggest that rape was used as a "weapon of war" during the Irish revolution, we can document enough incidents of sexual violence to demonstrate that it was more often a part of the overall violence of the period than has been acknowledged.[51] Peter Hart has demonstrated that the "dynamics of violence" ebbed and flowed from 1916 until the end of 1923 in ways that did not always correspond to the periodization of conflict; that is, the violence was not neatly and evenly contained within the confines of each phase of the revolutionary period (the Rising of 1916, the War of Independence [1919–21], and the Civil War [1922–23]). Mary M.'s attack occurred in one of the two twelve-month periods of heightened violence that Hart identified between the summers of 1920 and 1923.[52] Rather than conceptualizing her rape as a "war crime," Mary M. described it as part of the violence *caused* by war: "During the Political trouble when looting and robbing & raiding were carried on to such an extent in our country district my trouble began." She described an experience that mirrored numerous such "outrages" against women during the War of Independence, such as nighttime raids by gangs of men identifying themselves with one side of the ongoing military conflict, or women dragged from their beds, terrorized, and sexually assaulted.[53] In this light, the rape of Mary M. fits into a broader narrative of a general breakdown of law and order between 1916 and 1923, and it raises the prospect that the various violent groups did not behave that differently from one another. For example, in January 1924 the National Army's head chaplain reported to the archbishop of Dublin that "in different parts of the country armed bands looted, terrorized people, and indulged in drunken orgies and sexual abuse."[54]

[49] Ibid., 200.

[50] Wood, "Variation," 320.

[51] Benton, "Women Disarmed," 150, 163.

[52] Peter Hart, *The IRA at War 1916 to 1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 64, 68.

[53] Ryan "'Drunken Tans,'" 79. All the features of Miss M.'s rape are identified by Sharon Block as particular attributes of wartime sexual assaults: "the increased incidence of multiple attackers and victims, the association of rape with other assaults and property damage, and the brute force used in lieu of more diverse array of means to coerce sexual relations" ("Rape in the American Revolution: Process, Reaction, and Public Relations," in Heineman, *Sexual Violence*, 37).

[54] "Report from the Catholic Head Chaplain," in file "Army Chaplains" correspondence, 1923–39, box Govt. Politics (2): 1922–39, DDA. Townshend notes that there were also concerns amid antitreaty IRA regarding conduct and "interference with civilians" (*The Republic*, 419).

Although contemporary sources describing rape and sexual assault often had a clear propaganda intent, they also underscore the more general phenomenon that the word "outrage" was social code for a sexual assault. However, rape was a form of violence not easily accommodated in the script of the Irish revolution precisely because of the contemporary disquiet regarding the meaning of rape itself. The boundaries between sexual violence and sexual immorality were unclear in many contemporary accounts; thus, for a woman to establish her victimhood when raped, she needed to prove her moral character and physical resistance to the assault. Dianne Hall and Elizabeth Malcolm's work on the role and meaning of sexual violence in Ireland during the rebellion of 1641 is instructive here; when discussing the paucity of sources on sexual violence during that conflict, they note that rape "was viewed as an awkward and ambiguous form of violence. It did not always fit easily into narratives meant to demonstrate unequivocally the sufferings of innocent and persecuted communities."[55] The story of an Irish woman raped during the War of Independence by a British soldier, particularly one of the hated Black and Tans, lent itself more readily to the accepted national telling of that war—the bad British army against the good Irish people.[56] In contrast, the stories of Irish women being raped by Irish men who had claimed Republican credentials were far more difficult to absorb into the already fraught cultural framing of the Civil War.[57] As a Catholic woman raped by a Republican man, Mary M. therefore faced a particularly formidable task to affirm her moral innocence while demonstrating the legitimacy of her rape narrative.

Mary M. used language to describe her rape that was imbued with the widespread contemporary understanding of male sexuality and rape: "One brute satisfied his duty passion on me." Contemporary discourse frequently constructed male sexual appetites as brutish and uncontrollable—urges that if not satisfied would inevitably be vented in the form of rape.[58] Bourke observes that many historians also present rape "as a natural outcome of men's sexual needs."[59] Diarmaid Ferriter, for example, notes: "The circuit court cases during the 1920s and 1930s suggest a high degree of sexual frustration, violence and abuse."[60] In accepting rather than analyzing the contemporary characterization of rape as an act of sexual frustration, he fails to explore what this construction indicates about power and gender

[55] Dianne Hall and Elizabeth Malcolm, "The Rebels Turkish Tyranny: Understanding Sexual Violence in Ireland during the 1640s," *Gender & History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 65.

[56] David M. Leeson, *The Black & Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1–4, 223–29.

[57] Anne Dolan, *Commemorating the Irish Civil War: History and Memory, 1923–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–6, 121–46.

[58] McAvoy, "Sexual Crime," 84–99.

[59] Bourke, *Rape*, 383.

[60] Rape and sexual abuse are characterized repeatedly as manifestations of sexual frustration in Ferriter's study (*Occasions of Sin,* 112, 132, 181).

relations in modern Ireland. While Mary M. understood rape as a perverted male passion, she also clearly linked it with anger and violence. She was raped when her attacker became furious because he did not get any money and because she tried to prevent him from harming her aunt. Thus, while her words described male brutish appetite, the contextual understanding was clearly one of an abuse of power—a punishment for her refusal to comply with demands quite separate from sex. This representation of her rape indicates that she perceived it as connected with male sexuality *and* the violence of war.

Mary M.'s purpose in describing her rape to the archbishop was primarily to assure him of her honor and victimhood, not to seek justice or an understanding of what happened to her. As Sandra McAvoy has argued, the one way in which rape could be acceptably discussed during this period was in relation to resultant pregnancies. In focusing on the women who became pregnant as a result of rape, social campaigners like the Irish Women's Reform League carved out an acceptable arena for a debate on the issue, one that often challenged the idea that because men's sexual urges were deemed uncontrollable, rape was somehow inevitable and/or excusable.[61] It is significant (when single mothers were so often doubted) that no correspondent in the series of letters relating to Mary M.'s story expressed any surprise regarding a rape such as the one she described or any doubts as to the veracity of her account.

It is not possible to ascertain if Mary M. reported the gang raid or her rape to the police. Keating has noted that the authorities' ability "to gather effective data on the nature and level of criminal offences during the early Free State period was limited and exacerbated by the presence of anti-treaty forces which controlled certain areas during 1922–3."[62] According to Liam McNiffe, in February 1923 the new police force reported that fifteen of the twenty-six counties had a level of crime considered to be unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory, and Westmeath was among these.[63] In this climate there must have been a high level of unreported crime. It is also likely that women were reluctant to report rape for two potent reasons clearly in evidence in Mary M.'s letter: the fear of not being believed, and the contemporary conviction that a woman was contaminated by rape. It was widely believed that immorality spread and was contagious and that even the victims of abuse could become infected.[64] Thus, a woman's status as a victim was highly tenuous and could, even when accepted, still result in social exclusion or confinement.[65]

[61] McAvoy, "Sexual Crime," 85, 88.

[62] Keating, "Sexual Crime," 137.

[63] Liam McNiffe, *A History of the Garda Síochána: A Social History of the Force, 1922–52* (Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 1999), 28.

[64] Bourke, *Rape*, 119–46; O'Sullivan, "'This Otherwise Delicate Subject,'" 198.

[65] The victims of sexual abuse were often confined in Magdalen asylums. See Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*; L. Earner-Byrne, "Child Sexual Abuse, History and the Pursuit

Mary M.'s letter was imbued with this sense of moral contamination. She wrote that three months after the attack she "confided [her] secret out side the confessional to a Holy Franciscan Preist in Athlone who kept me thro, his prayers, from ending my miserable life." The reference to the confessional indicates that she regarded what she had to tell as a sin and that she was running the risk of confessing her story outside the protection of the confessional box in order to secure the assistance that would have been impossible if her confidant had remained bound to the confessional seal. When she described the birth of her son, she used the image of falling: "When in my agonies I fell I was justly punished yes scourged." An element of this sense of being punished was probably absorbed from the religious rhetoric she was familiar with as a practicing Catholic. For example, she described her trial as "the greatest & heaviest cross God can send any one." However, the fact that she gave so little space to the wrongdoing of her attackers indicates not just the sensitivity of the topic but the ambivalence of her position as victim. Instead, in a society that was beginning to interpret the meaning of independence in terms of a breakdown in the social and moral order, she framed her violation as part of a general attack on the morality of Irish women.[66] Encouraging her reader to regard her attack as part of a continuous tale of women and war since the revolutionary period, she begged the archbishop to "pray for the purity of Our Irish Girls," connecting her plight to her church's wider self-declared moral mission to rehabilitate the Irish moral character in the wake of political independence.

While her letter is full of descriptions of mental anguish, it is not clear whether this anguish or sense of being punished resulted from her rape or pregnancy or both. She wrote of wanting to end her "terrible" life in the river, of being "punished" and "scourged," and of being in the "torments of hell." She was unable to sleep, pray, or take any comfort in the rituals of her faith: "There are days when my mind seems paralysed & refuses to work. I can't feel as I used to I can't pray & confess & Communion seems useless to me and leaves me no happier with almighty God. I can't think of anything only my one terrible sorrow and that God has turned from me." In a church where suicide was a mortal sin, she wrote to the archbishop that she had planned to drown herself and that "there are nights when sleep never visits my heavy tear swoollen eyes and I ask Our Lord if it pleases His Holy Will to let me rest in the quiet grave." In order to pay for her son's care she had had to "lie, steal & borrow & most of it comes from my Aunts old age pension. By taking this from her I know I'm do-

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of Blame in Modern Ireland," in *Exhuming Passions: The Pressure of the Past in Ireland and Australia*, ed. K. Holmes and S. Ward (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 51–70, 59.

[66] In various official reports, contemporaries anxiously counted the increase in illegitimate births, which although very small did increase slightly between 1920 and 1925. The general view was that the years of instability and violence had resulted in an erosion of parental control and an increase in sexual immorality. See Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, 173–77.

ing wrong and depriving her of many necessaries of Life. I ask myself the question why do I call myself a Catholic? I can't be & have to do all this." She felt forsaken and that she had been forced to violate the principles of her upbringing. Thus, Mary M.'s letter placed her religious redemption at the feet of the archbishop and her church, which shifted the emphasis from her identity as a sinner to one of a devout but abandoned penitent.

## The Status of Unmarried Mothers

As a result of rape, Mary M. became an unmarried mother, but how representative was she of unmarried mothers in Ireland? As already noted, pregnancy as a result of rape was an acknowledged reality, but women's reluctance to report the crime makes it impossible to determine how common it was. Furthermore, a general belief that a sexual act could only be called rape if the woman physically resisted meant that many women did not conceptualize sex that occurred as a result of economic, psychological, or other more subtle forms of pressure as rape. This contemporary ambiguity is hardly surprising, as historians still fail to incorporate more nuanced understandings of rape into their readings of sources. For example, Moira Maguire relies on tenuous logic to question a woman's allegations of rape when she recounts the case of Christine F., who in 1933 was accused of infanticide. Maguire does not specify where Christine F. was from, merely that she became pregnant while her husband was abroad as a result of rape, but Maguire writes: "[Christine] F. claimed that she was raped, although she refused, under interrogation, to identify the rapist, nor did she report assault at the time." Maguire then concludes: "But what is particularly striking was her fear that she would have 'no life' with her husband if she did not do away with the child, perhaps suggesting that her claim of rape was fabricated."[67] In effect, Maguire undermines a woman's version of her rape on the basis of no evidence. Rattigan also fails to fully consider the complexity of consent when force was either feared or real. For example, when discussing the 1930 case of Mary T., Rattigan notes that "although Mary T. was not raped, when she described her experience with the father of her infant she suggested that he used some degree of force. Mary T. said she tried to stop John C. 'when he lifted [her] clothes up' but when he used force she said she then decided to let him do whatever he wanted." Rattigan goes on to note that some women accused of infanticide in Ireland may have claimed rape to protect their reputations, and she relates a case in 1936 of Kate Anne F., who was questioned in County Sligo on suspicion of infanticide. Kate Anne, Rattigan explains, "identified her deceased infant's father and implied that intercourse had not been consensual. The male in question was not

[67] Moira J. Maguire, *Precarious Childhood in Post-Independence Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 218.

unknown to Kate Anne; she had often seen him in the area prior to the incident and she knew his name but was not in a relationship with him. When asked if she struggled with him, Kate replied in the affirmative but she was unable to (or unwilling perhaps) to say how long she had spent with him."[68] Rattigan leaves much unstated, but the implication is that Kate Anne's hints of nonconsensual sex were suspect because she knew the man and because she spent an unspecified amount of time with him. If it takes so little to cast doubt over women's claims of rape with the benefit of twenty-first-century hindsight and all we have learned about the dynamics of power and gender relations, how much easier was it to silence these women in the early twentieth century? While unmarried motherhood as a result of rape may well have been the exception rather than the rule, it is important to acknowledge that more women became pregnant as a result of rape than history acknowledges.

We have limited concrete evidence about the social profile of unmarried mothers during this period. Images of the pregnant domestic servant abound and probably reflected both the centrality of domestic service as a source of employment for single women and the fact that in this setting women were particularly vulnerable to exploitation and monitoring.[69] However, relying on an investigation of emigrants' travel permits in the 1940s, Jennifer Redmond has demonstrated that unwed mothers came from all social classes and were as likely to come from the middle class as from the working class.[70] Examinations of infanticide cases, while a somewhat problematic way of generating a profile of unmarried mothers, demonstrate that the average Irish unmarried mother was in her midtwenties, a fact that perhaps reflects the later marriage age in Ireland.[71] In fact, all sources lead one to conclude that Irish unmarried mothers reflected Irish society—there was no particular profile. While Mary M., aged between thirty-eight and forty-three, was older than the average first-time mother and than the average unmarried mother, she was not exceptionally so. Irish mothers, both married and unmarried, were older than their European counterparts, as since the mid-nineteenth century the tendency to post-

[68] Rattigan, *"What Else Could I Do?,"* 154.

[69] Domestic service accounted for one-third of all employed women in 1911 and remained a significant employer until the 1950s. See M. E. Daly, *Women and Work in Ireland* (Dublin: Dundalgan, 1997), 31.

[70] J. Redmond, "In the Family Way and away from the Family: Examining the Evidence in Irish Unmarried Mothers in Britain, 1920s–40s," in *"She Said She Was in the Family Way": Pregnancy and Infancy in Modern Ireland*, ed. Elaine Farrell (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2012), 176.

[71] Unmarried mothers who killed their infants made up a small proportion of all unmarried mothers, and even those women who came before the courts on charges of infanticide can only be said to be representative of those who had charges laid against them. These numbers therefore tell us nothing about those who were never suspected of the crime. Redmond's research confirms that the average age of unmarried mothers was twenty-six years ("In the Family Way," 176).

pone marriage until at least twenty-six years for women and twenty-nine for men had become the norm.[72]

Yet Mary M. was realistic in believing that neither her relatively advanced age nor the fact that she had been raped would protect her or her family from social condemnation as an unmarried mother. Fearing that her secret would be exposed, she wrote: "I craved the S. Heart & His Blessed Mother to screen me from exposure and God granted me this request." Mary M. was painfully aware that in 1920s Ireland there was virtually no tolerance for sex outside wedlock (consensual or otherwise) and even less for its consequences—an illegitimate child. When a single expectant woman could not turn to her family—or when she did so and was rejected—her options were relatively limited and curtailed by her social status and religion. Most unmarried mothers in the lower socioeconomic bracket were dealt with as poor-relief cases; they were institutionalized in a county home (the erstwhile workhouses) and ultimately separated from their children.[73] Some survived, precariously, outside the county home on public assistance, charity, and intermittent employment.[74] As is well known, there was also in Ireland a network of Magdalen asylums, whose goal was the rehabilitation of women in the lower socioeconomic bracket.[75] Various rescue societies based in Dublin catered to women from all over the country, including the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society (1913), the Saint Patrick's Guild (1910), the Legion of Mary hostel, Regina Coeli (1921), and the Bethany Home for Protestants (1921). Between 1922 and 1933 the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary opened three maternity homes in Cork, Galway, and Westmeath for "the reception and reformation of girls who for the first time have had illegitimate offspring, or as they are usually designated—first offenders."[76] These homes accepted private cases and referrals from local authorities or from one of the three

[72] The oldest unmarried mother in Redmond's cohort was forty-four (ibid.). Likewise, in Rattigan's study the oldest unmarried mother was thirty-nine (*"What Else Could I Do?,"* 40). There were complex reasons for this postponement of marriage in Ireland, many of them relating to the impact of the Great Famine (1845–50) and changes in land and inheritance practices. See Mary E. Daly, "The Irish Family since the Famine: Continuity and Change," in *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies* 3, no. 2 (1999): 1–21.

[73] Marie Luddy, "Moral Rescue and Unmarried Mothers in Ireland in the 1920s," *Women's Studies* 30, no. 6 (2001): 797–817, 799.

[74] Maguire argues that "thousands of unmarried mothers kept their children" and raised them in their communities; however, she offers little supporting evidence and later acknowledges that she is relying upon the "patchy nature of the statistical data" to argue that it was a "distinct possibility that more illegitimate children went home with their families than had previously been assumed" (*Precarious Childhood*, 49, 51).

[75] Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110–12.

[76] *Report of the Local Government and Public Health, 1922–1925* (Dublin, 1926), 56. For a detailed contextualization of these homes, see Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, 172–220.

poor-law mother-and-baby homes.[77] There is also evidence that women with means paid for private nursing home care and for their infants to be immediately adopted.[78] Finally, a significant proportion of Irish unmarried mothers immigrated to Britain to avoid the punitive Irish system.[79]

Mary M., like so many single women in the 1920s rural Irish economy, had no private means. "I asked a loan from a few people," she wrote to the archbishop, "but of course they could not lend knowing I had no means at my back by which they could be re-paid." Despite her poverty, she managed to hide her pregnancy for several months. Living in a rural farmstead in a small but scattered parish with her aged blind aunt and her uncle, she stood a better chance than most of guarding her secret. We cannot, of course, know whether the aunt suspected or not, but the fact that Mary M. admits that she stole from her aunt rather than revealing her desperation highlights the strength of social taboos against unwed motherhood.[80] With little but this pilfered money, Mary M. headed to Dublin without any real plan:

> As time was drawing to its close I felt almost a lunatic. I borrowed as much money as took me to Dublin with the intentions of ending this terrible life in the bed of the [river] Liffey I went into some church and when I came out I met outside the door a miserable old woman who asked for a copper. She saw I was in trouble I told her its cause. She spoke to me of Miss Cruice who conducts the office in Abbey St[reet] which is under your patronage and from knowing this it inspired me to appeal to your great charity. I turned to speak to her & she had gone I took it as a message from Our Lady of Sorrows to bear my sufferings bravely and also that I was to be saved from Hells torments I went to Miss Cruice who was kindness itself may the S. H. of Jesus bless her.

At least four months pregnant, Mary M. arrived in Dublin and sought refuge in a church. Her description of her encounter with a "miserable old woman" is steeped in religious references and imagery; however, the fact that this woman referred Mary M. to Miss Cruice demonstrates a keen understanding of the moral landscape of the city. Mary Josephine Cruice ran the Saint Patrick's Guild, a Roman Catholic rescue society that took in vulnerable, often illegitimate children and baptized them. The children

[77] The cost was three shillings a day for mother and child; there was no charge if the infant died. See *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1928–9* (Dublin, 1930), 112.

[78] Rattigan, *"What Else Could I Do?,"* 62.

[79] See L. Earner-Byrne, "'Moral Repatriation': The Response to Irish Unmarried Mothers in Britain, 1920s–1960s," in *To and from Ireland: Planned Migration Schemes, c. 1600–2000*, ed. Patrick J. Duffy (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2004), 162–63.

[80] Rattigan notes that while there was a "reasonably high level of family involvement in infanticide cases involving single mothers" in southern Ireland between 1900 and 1950, there were also many families that seemed shocked by the discovery of a relative's pregnancy (*"What Else Could I Do?,"* 77, 80).

were then either temporarily housed at the guild's own home, placed in other institutions, boarded out in "homes of respectable families," or offered for adoption.[81] Cruice's desired clientele was the "better class, genuine first offenders, of previous good character, representing various sections of the community, teachers, nurses, daughters of respectable farmers and sometimes of professional men."[82] As the educated niece of a farmer in possession of a modest but respectable house, Mary M. perfectly fit Cruice's definition of "better class."

Cruice interviewed prospective clients at the guild's main offices at 50 Middle Abbey Street on the south side of Dublin city. This was where Mary M.'s initial contact with Cruice must have taken place sometime in 1923. The guild was very busy that year, with 2,247 women interviewed and 2,007 letters received. Cruice reported that the guild sought to "secure peace of mind to those mothers who owe their unhappy plight to incredulity, folly or impulse rather than to any inherent wickedness."[83] Mary M. certainly did not owe her "plight" to "folly" or "impulse," but there was no mention of women assaulted in the sample cases that Cruice selected for her annual reports. Was Mary M.'s case so unusual that it did not warrant listing? Or was it the norm to absorb such cases into other categories, as happened with child sexual abuse and incest?[84] In many respects, Mary M. represented the ideal case for rescue—a devout countrywoman defiled by marauding Republicans. And yet the annual reports were more likely to provide prosaic descriptions of "innocence," "fall," and "redemption." Leanne McCormick argues that such narratives of "seduced innocence" enabled women and rescue homes to discuss sex in a socially acceptable way, and it may have helped the women to gain admittance to the homes in the first place.[85] The sample cases were intended to affirm the superior quality of the guild's operations and to elicit the pathos of potential benefactors. Accounts of sexual assault complicated this narrative and therefore remained untold.

Cruice advised Mary M. "to return home which I did, I went back to her in Oct. and gave birth to a baby boy in Holles St Hospital." Thus, somehow, Mary M. saw out the final stages of her confinement at home and then traveled to the National Maternity Hospital; according to his birth certificate, her infant son was born there on 4 October 1923.[86] Despite

[81] In 1919 Miss Cruice purchased Saint Patrick's Home at 39 Mountjoy Square to receive "delicate" and illegitimate infants. The text quote is from Miss Cruice to Archbishop Byrne, 29 April 1922, Lay Organisations (2), Byrne Papers, DDA.

[82] Memo by Cruice, "Origins of St Patrick's Guild," ca. 1932, DDA.

[83] The statistics and the text quote are from *Annual Report of the Saint Patrick's Guild, 1923–24*, 8.

[84] O'Sullivan, "'This Otherwise Delicate Subject,'" 198.

[85] Leanne McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality: Women in Twentieth-Century Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 49–52.

[86] *Civil Registration Index* (1923), 2:482.

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having been "kindness itself" during their first meeting, Cruice failed to explain the financial arrangements, because Mary M. faced a dreadful shock after the birth of her son. "It was only when 9 days expired & I held this tiny soul in my arms," she explained, "that I realised my position. I didn't know that I was to pay for its support and what harder blow could be struck than that I craved & begged of the S Heart & the Holy Face of Jesus to take it to Heaven but to my request a deaf ear has been turned—God must want to punish me still. . . . For the past 9 months each month I had to send Miss Cruice 25/- for its support." In fact, it was common practice for unmarried mothers to pay maintenance for their illegitimate children either to homes or to foster mothers.[87] Cruice, though ever dogged in her rescue work, was nonetheless exacting a price to save the souls of Catholic babies. Her services did not come cheaply (in fact, they were considerably more expensive than the cost of a foster mother), and she was not afraid to chase her money, however desperate the woman. Indeed, in 1935, eleven years after Cruice's dealings with Mary M., a similar case came before the archbishop. The priest involved admitted having had "a few stand up fights with Cruice" over money in the past, and he sarcastically suggested that 'Nothing for nothing' should be the new motto of the St Patrick's Guild."[88]

By July 1924 Mary M. was distraught because she could no longer pay the maintenance fee required by Cruice to keep her baby. Mary M. explained: "Miss Cruice has offered to take the Baby completely off my hands for £20. This I could not give I don't possess it." The lump sum Cruice requested was to secure the private adoption of Mary M.'s infant son. There was no legislation governing adoption in Ireland until 1952; thus, women in Mary M.'s situation were vulnerable to the financial exploitation of adoption brokers like Cruice.[89] Cruice admitted in 1921 that a permanent arrangement for children in her care often took three years to secure and that adoption was generally only achieved "by means of money received from its mother."[90] In her bid to raise the adoption money, Mary M. had few cards to play, and, in desperation, she used her trump card: the baby's soul. She played her final hand with reluctant grace: "Oh My Lord for the love of the Holy Face of Jesus and the Sorrows of His Holy Mother help me do something for me to save this Angel's soul and keep it in the Catholic Faith I can't pay another month I'll have to ask some Protestant

[87] Sarah-Anne Buckley, "Found in a 'Dying' Condition: Nurse-Children in Ireland, 1872–1952," in Farrell, *"She Said,"* 145–52.

[88] In this case the mother was paying Cruice ten shillings a week for the baby's upkeep, and the priest pointed out that as "foster mothers by law receive only 7/6 per week . . . Cruice made 2/6 on the deal" (Tim Leondon to Dr Dunne, ca. July 1935, AB 7, Charity Cases, box 5, 1931–35, Byrne Papers, DDA).

[89] Rattigan noted the case of an unmarried mother in 1938 who had paid a nurse fifty pounds to arrange a private adoption (*"What Else Could I Do?,"* 62).

[90] Cruice, "Object of the St. Patrick's Guild," ca. 1925, 5, Lay Organisations (2), Byrne Papers, DDA.

Lady to take it. I have not the money to save its dear soul And to be forced to part with it under those conditions my Lord would drive me insane but I see no way out of the difficulty." She knew that regardless of her own fate and faith, her church would be sensitive to the threat of proselytism facing her illegitimate child. Catholics were keenly aware of their church's fear of what the bishop of Galway referred to as "soul-snatchers who descend upon the homes of poverty and prowl around hospitals."[91] Mary M.'s religious threat was common currency in the negotiations between impoverished or disempowered Catholics and their church; hundreds of others who wrote the archbishop also declared their intention of turning to the Protestants if their application for assistance did not succeed.[92] For unmarried mothers, particularly, the concern regarding their child's soul was their main leverage in a world set firmly against them. Indeed, this was the key argument used by Mary M.'s religious referee when he testified that she had tried to manage alone and that her failure could mean the loss of the child's soul to the Protestant faith: "I do furthermore think that there is this chance—that the child might pass from Catholic hands to Protestant control."[93]

Mary M. brought her letter to a close by stressing her desire to "repay" her archbishop both with prayers and with money. Her words linked a Christian sense of retributive justice with the human realities of her life: her prayers, her aunt, her trip to mass. She also connected her faith with her truth; the very sanctity of the mass was called as her witness:

> I fear I have wearied you but I pour forth my sorrow to one who understands, relieves poor weak human nature.
>
> For the love of Jesus & His Holy Mother do something for my help [*sic*]. May the Precious drop of Jesus' blood Crown you with garlands of Roses & I shall never forget you in my poor prayers. When it is Gods will to take my Aunt from this world and He spares me Please God I shall be able to repay you And even before that I shall be able to remit something to you. This is the First Friday I was to mass this morning & thro' that Holy Sacrifice I promised every word I told you is perfectly true. May the S. Heart reward you.
>
> I am
> My Lord
> Your most Humble Servant
> Mary M.

The archbishop sent Mary M. the amount she requested within two weeks of her letter. Having received a check for twenty pounds on her

[91] Catholic Protection and Rescue Society, *16th Report of the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society 1929* (Dublin, n.d.), 3.
[92] Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, 75–89.
[93] Cyprian to Dunne, 8 July 1924.

behalf, Father Cyprian wrote to the archbishop on 19 July 1924 to thank him for his "v. gracious & generous charity." Father Cyprian was sure that "the girl herself will write to thank his Grace for his great kindness towards her," but no such letter survives.[94]

## MATERNAL LOVE AND ILLEGITIMATE INFANTS

What of her son? Mary M. seemed to regard herself and her son as bound together in tragedy. Although she "craved & begged of the S. Heart & the Holy Face of Jesus to take it to Heaven," in effect wishing her baby dead, she emphasized heaven rather than death, stressing that what she was living through was hell.[95] She repeated this desire to spare the baby the agonies of life in a hostile society toward the end of her letter: "I'll never cease to crave Him to take that Angel among His Angels where Sorrow may never cross its path as it has done mine." She thus thought of the death of her child as a mercy—a mother's blessing.[96] However, this hope was also a plea for release from the torment she found herself in, for she interpreted the rejection of these prayers as a punishment. One of the Department of Local Government and Public Health's inspectors for boarded-out children, Miss Alice Litster, believed that the desperation experienced by unmarried mothers could lead to infanticide.[97] She described the infants whose bodies were found on the bogs, byways, and lanes of Ireland as the "infant martyrs of convenience, respectability and fear."[98] It is in this social climate that Mary M.'s prayers for the death of her infant should be understood.

Mary M. appears never to have considered keeping her son, which is hardly surprising in view of her society's treatment of these fragile "illegitimate families." As inspector Litster lamented in her 1930 report, "The social significance of birth out of wedlock is far reaching. The fundamental right to a home with their own parents is denied these children."[99] Society was not just resistant to unmarried mothers raising their children but also unforgiving of the children themselves, condemning many to premature death. According to the registrar-general, "At least one out of every 3

[94] Fr. Cyprian, the Abbey, Galway, to Fr. Dunne, 19 July 1924, AB 7, Charity Cases, box 1, 1921–26, Byrne Papers, DDA.

[95] The realities of infanticide cannot have been unknown to Mary M., since only a few months after she was raped, and when she must have realized she was pregnant, the *Westmeath Independent* reported in detail on the discovery of a dead infant in the Clonminch cemetery. See "Baby's Body Found in a Sack," *Westmeath Independent*, 3 March 1923.

[96] This accords with Rattigan's findings that many single mothers believed their children would be "better off dead" (*"What Else Could I Do?,"* 3).

[97] *Report of the Local Government and Public Health, 1934–1935* (Dublin, 1935), 409.

[98] Alice Litster, "Unmarried Mother, in Great Britain and at Home, 8 May 1948," in *Implementation of the Children's Acts 1945–51*, box 3, Clandillon Papers, National Archives of Ireland. This comment was deleted by internal departmental censors.

[99] "Inspector of Boarded-Out Children," in *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1930–31* (Dublin, 1932), app. 42, 275.

illegitimate infants born alive in 1923 died before the completion of their first year of life."[100] Chillingly, that same year thirty-two infants died while in Cruice's care.[101] The statistical odds were stacked against Mary M.'s infant, who at the time of her writing was only nine months old and had thus not yet reached the crucial milestone of his first birthday. Unless adopted, the boy faced long-term foster care and, ultimately, committal to an industrial school. These were often large-scale homes run by religious orders in which thousands of Irish children were held for the duration of their legal childhood for reasons of poverty, truancy, or illegitimacy. The recent publications of the Ryan and Murphy reports into these schools have revealed that physical and sexual abuse was endemic.[102] The adoption fee that Mary M. secured as a result of her letter therefore offered her son his best chance of survival.

We do not know if her infant survived, whether he was eventually adopted, or if he ever knew of or managed to trace his mother. Mary M.'s last message to history about her son was printed on his birth certificate: she named him Cyprian after the priest who helped them both. This underscored her quest to be believed and her desire to focus his life on his religious rescue rather than his brutal conception. On first reading of the letter it appears that she refused to name him and repeatedly distanced herself from him. However, his name is in the letter, albeit hidden from the archbishop, like a code of love only she could read. If adopted, her son would not bear his given name; therefore, the name Cyprian would remain her private testament to the truth of her experience.

## Conclusion: History and the Silencing of Sexual Violence

Mary M.'s letter enables what Geoff Eley has called a "qualitative understanding" of everyday life in this period because it gives us access to an ordinary person's negotiation of what was usually buried within the confines of the private life.[103] While her case provides us with a revealing example of the impact of social mores on an individual, perhaps of greater significance is her letter's implicit illustration of how a moral climate was constructed and internalized. Gender and religion intermeshed in her experience of rape and unmarried motherhood; as a result of sexual violence she understood herself to be morally compromised, and she firmly believed that her condemnation *and* salvation lay in the hands of her society and religion. And yet, while

[100] Registrar-General, *Annual Report of the Registrar-General, 1923* (Dublin, 1923), xxiii.

[101] The report noted that 143 children were admitted, 98 were discharged, 32 died, and 18 remained. See *Annual Report of the Saint Patrick's Guild, 1923–24,* 10.

[102] See Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse [Ryan Report] (Dublin, 2009); Dublin Archdiocesan Commission of Investigation Report [Murphy Report] (Dublin, 2009).

[103] Geoff Eley, foreword to *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. Alf Lüdtke, trans. William Templer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), viii.

Mary M. was operating under the pressures of her environment, she was also shaping them by her own agency. She believed that the only way to live with an illegitimate pregnancy was to hide it, to make it disappear, and she therefore played her own part in the silencing of sexual violence and its consequences. For her own very good reasons, she sought to keep her story hidden from public discourse by covering up what had happened to her and by securing her child's adoption. Ironically, in seeking to do so she left an invaluable source for history—a letter. This letter (and the response it triggered) illustrates one of the ways that sexual violence and its consequences were socially organized—how they were cleared away and tidied up. Her letter gives life to an experience that history has tended to frame as a mere footnote to bigger battles; it reminds us that although the past has its silences, we must make space for them, even when they are fragmentary, allowing the sources to speak of previously marginalized experiences.[104]

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[104] Inga Clendinnen, "Fellow Sufferers: History and Imagination," *Australian Humanities Review*, 1996, 100–109.