Introduction

In the late 1980s, having completed some preliminary work on the history of Magdalen asylums in Ireland, I gave two talks, one at Limerick and the other in Galway, on the general theme of prostitution in Ireland. In Galway I was told that a number of shops refused to put up the poster advertising the talk because the words 'prostitution' and 'Ireland' appeared together in the same space. In Limerick two members of the audience approached me after my talk and asked, in quite an aggressive manner, how I could possibly talk about such a subject, and thanked God the British had gone, as there had been no prostitution in Ireland since. The idea of Irish purity, particularly sexual purity, has long had a strong hold on the population. Various published accounts by travellers to the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stressed the morality of Irish women. The bishop of Galway, Dr McHale, in his testimony to the Poor Law Inquiry Commission of the 1830s noted that 'there are instances of parishes in this province [Connaught], in which there are more than a thousand families in which there has not been one illegitimate child for ten years'.[1] Other witnesses observed that any 'failure in chastity' on the part of a woman meant that she 'forfeited for life her character and caste'.[2] In 1835 Monsignor Kinseley, of Kilkenny, in a conversation with Alexis de Tocqueville observed in relation to morality that 'twenty years in the confessional have made me aware that the misconduct of girls is very rare, and that of married women almost unknown'.[3] With regard to vice in London one commentator remarked in 1872 that 'Irish virtue is the only prophylactic which resists it'.[4] Writing in 1914, when prostitution was strongly evident on the streets of Dublin, Harold Begbie observed the city to be

> almost entirely free of the common vice which disfigures cities. There is nothing in the whole town that suggests for a moment anything approaching to the central and unblushing shame of London. Indeed, a man might live all his life in Dublin and never see a single tragedy of this kind. Girls fall, perhaps willingly take to that way of getting money, but they do not remain in Dublin. Dublin does not pay.[5]

While some travellers did acknowledge that vice, and especially prostitution, existed in Ireland, few commented on it much.[7] Within Irish nationalism there was a degree of puritanism and moral righteousness. C. S. Andrews, recalling his associates in the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century, wrote that

> we held strongly to the social ethos of republicanism in that . . . we were puritanical in outlook and behaviour. We didn't drink. We respected women and . . . knew nothing about them. We disapproved of the wearing of formal clothes . . . of anyone who took an interest in food . . . of women 'making up' or wearing jewellery.[8]

The Irish Christian Brothers proclaimed in 1924 that 'purity is the national virtue of Ireland'.[6] At a court case held in Newbridge in 1928 a judge, sentencing a soldier from the Curragh camp to prison for assault on a young girl, stated that he was 'glad to say that cases of indecent assault were uncommon in this country, and that was attributable to the manhood of the country. It had rightly been said that Irishmen had greater respect for women than the men of any other country in Europe.'[9] The moral superiority of the Irish people was emphasised in the *Irish Press* in 1931 when, explicitly linking Catholicism and morality, it declared that 'not only do our sons rule over scores of millions of Catholics throughout the world, but they play a part in the formation of the character of many nations that may yet save civilisation from the moral suicide it has planned for itself'.[10]

This self-belief in Irish purity and moral superiority has rarely been challenged. The perpetuation of the image of Ireland as a sexually pure nation, and one in which an unrelentingly puritanical attitude existed to sexual expression, has in fact been bolstered by the work of a number of historians. Hasia Diner, for instance, observes in her study of female emigration that 'Irish women rarely crossed the line when it came to sexual deviance . . . In Ireland, illegitimacy was virtually unknown, and prostitution extremely rare.'[11] K. H. Connell's work on illegitimacy in pre-famine Ireland states unequivocally that the incidence of illegitimacy was abnormally low. He observes that the harsh treatment meted out to unmarried mothers made premarital sexual activity unwelcome and this, united with parental and Church condemnation, constrained such activity. Repression and purity went hand in hand, a view that has been accepted almost uncritically.[12] An investigation into the history of prostitution in Ireland problematises this image and suggests that resistance to the Catholic Church's teaching on celibacy and sexual continence, as reflected in the levels and extent of prostitution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was far more common than generally believed.

For many influential commentators prostitution was a problem that could never be eliminated. Dr William Acton's influential study, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities*, first published in 1857, argued that prostitution would exist as long as there was a 'demand for the article supplied by its agency'.[13] One of the witnesses to an 1854 committee of inquiry on Dublin hospitals believed that 'prostitution is absolutely necessary; if it is discouraged amongst the soldiers, you would reduce the moral character of the men. It is much better that soldiers have free access to women, or they will have worse.'[14] Frank Duff, the founder of the Legion of Mary, believed that a prostitute class was necessary to protect 'respectable' women. In a government inquiry into the extent of venereal disease he observed that 'it is probable that solicitation on the streets will never be completely prevented . . . there will always be some [prostitutes] left who will meet the needs of the man with utterly depraved appetites'.[15]

There was a considerable debate in England as to why women became prostitutes, a debate more muted in Ireland. Within England the effects of industrialisation were for many a major cause of prostitution, as were poverty and unemployment. Ireland, of course, was never industrialised to any great extent, although poverty was rife and understood, when allied to unmarried motherhood, to be a major cause of prostitution. The evidence given to the poor law inquiry sustains this link. As one witness claimed, 'most of the females who infest the streets of cities are such persons';[16] reinforcing that view another stated that 'almost all prostitution may be traced to that cause'.[17] In all countries prostitution offered women a means of making a living where they could not find alternative employment, or where that employment did not offer them a subsistence wage. The structure of the Irish economy offered few opportunities to women. The expansion of the domestic linen industry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries increased the earning power of young men and women, although it did not give women increased status in the community. In many cases a woman's earnings were absorbed into the household income. In the nineteenth century the spread of the factory system undermined domestic industry, especially in textiles. The 1841 census recorded over 600,000 textile and clothing workers, over 500,000 of whom were women. By 1881 textiles employed fewer than 90,000 women. Post-famine Ireland experienced considerable industrial decline with linen mills and textile factories, mostly based in Ulster, providing one of the few forms of employment for married women outside the home. The brunt of the fall in industrial employment bore on women and they had few alternative sources of employment.

The major forms of employment for women in the post-famine period were domestic service and agriculture. But the number of women

recorded in employment fell steadily from 29 per cent in 1861 to 19.5 per cent by 1911. The 1911 census reveals that of the 157,146 women who made up the female population of Dublin, 116,307 were enumerated as having no specified occupation. Of this number 33,623 were aged between twenty-five and forty-five.[18] The majority of domestic servants in Ireland in the pre- and post-famine period were young, single women. While domestic service was considered a respectable form of employment it appears to have been a major route into prostitution for many women.[19] This was the only area of female employment that expanded in the post-famine years. By 1911 one working woman in three was a servant, although the number of female servants began to decline from the 1890s. Other opportunities were emerging for women of the middle classes by this time and they were finding openings as schoolteachers, clerks, shop assistants and hospital matrons. Women were also involved in other forms of paid work. For instance, many women ran huxter shops or engaged in street selling, while others helped to run pubs, grocery shops and other retail businesses. Many worked as laundresses or took in lodgers. In Goldsmith's Street in Dublin in 1911 the census records twenty-eight of the fifty-four houses containing boarders.[20] The fact of single women keeping rooms was to become a source of anxiety for the moralists who saw single, independent women as a threat to morality.[21] Such women were believed to use their rooms for immoral purposes, and thus all single women living alone were suspect.

Women were more vulnerable to economic hardship than men. Poor pay, lack of skills, children and lack of suitable employment all had an impact on how well women could survive economically. For poorer women it was more difficult to remain economically independent and they were more likely than men to use welfare institutions to support them. From the beginnings of the poor law system in Ireland women were to be found in workhouses in greater numbers than men. According to the 1881 census there were 148 hospitals, asylums and almshouses which provided a permanent residence for the ill and distressed. The total number of places available in these institutions was 5,575 and women took up 72 per cent of them. In 1870 there were 6,338 able-bodied females in Irish workhouses as compared with 2,666 men. By 1900 the numbers were 3,338 able-bodied women and 2,386 men.[22] Women entered workhouses for a number of reasons: some were ill, others incapacitated by pregnancy or injury. Some were destitute and used the workhouse as a means of shelter and sustenance. The connection between poverty and prostitution has often been made. That prostitution was a less than lucrative business is evident from the hundreds of Irish prostitutes who were homeless, and whose poverty is witnessed in their

entrance to workhouses and Magdalen asylums. In the period after the famine there were a growing number of single women in Irish society. In 1871, 43 per cent of all women aged between fifteen and forty-five were married; by 1911 that had dropped to 36 per cent.[23] By 1926, 24 per cent of women aged between forty-five and fifty-four were single.[24] Poor employment prospects and poor marriage prospects were factors that help to account for the high levels of emigration among Irish women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Between 1790 and 1914 the gender balance between male and female emigrants from Ireland was fairly even. However, the number of women believed to have emigrated from Ireland in the nineteenth century is thought to be over 3 million. This exceeded the number of women actually living in Ireland as recorded in the 1901 census. By the 1870s, as Mary Daly has shown, women accounted for half of all emigrants, and women were to remain the majority of emigrants, with the exception of the years 1911–26, until the Second World War.[25]

The period covered by this study, the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, saw the rise of prostitution as a social issue of concern to moralists, public health advocates and the police. From the early nineteenth century, as Jill Harsin has noted, the policing of prostitution underwent significant changes.[26] In many European countries and US cities regulatory systems were introduced which attempted to control the levels of prostitution and the spread of venereal diseases, systems overseen by the police and the medical profession. In France such regulation originated in Paris in 1802 as a means of examining public prostitutes for venereal disease and it quickly developed into a mandatory system of surveillance.[27] This kind of regulation became common in other places: the Italian, German and Scandinavian states, Belgium, the Netherlands and Poland, among other countries, introduced regulatory systems which followed the French model.[28] In contrast to the rest of Europe a regulatory system was not put in place in Britain until the 1860s, under the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs), and Ireland was part of that system, in this instance being treated as an integral part of the United Kingdom rather than as a colony.[29] Regulation was not without its critics and in the United Kingdom a concerted attempt by feminists, liberal and political activists, with active support from Ireland, eventually led to the suspension of the CDAs in 1883 and their repeal in 1886.

Ireland was a predominantly Catholic country in this period. Catholics made up about 80.9 per cent of the population in 1834, 74.2 per cent by 1901 and 92.6 per cent by 1926. The modern Irish Catholic Church was built in the nineteenth century. Under the leadership of Cardinal Paul Cullen the morale and professional competence of Irish priests was raised,

the hierarchical leadership was centralised and as the century proceeded the Church took control of education and a myriad of welfare institutions which bound the people to it. The result was a politically conservative, religiously aggressive and highly centralised and bureaucratised Church. Nuns were to play a formative role in Catholic expansion and reorganisation.[30] Tom Inglis has argued that the priest, 'by his mere physical presence as a civilised, disciplined and well-mannered Catholic man' controlled all aspects of Irish social life.[31] He argues that the Catholic Church's control of sexuality 'became centred on gaining control of women's sex'.[32] Through confession, sermons and the institution of societies and confraternities the Church, it has been argued, gained control over the expression of sexuality in Ireland. Inglis, however, fails to acknowledge the resistance that existed to this formulation. Prostitution, for instance, survived with little interference from the Church. Levels of unmarried motherhood, where women choose to leave Ireland and have their babies in England, remained a concern and a problem for Church and state until, arguably, the 1960s.[33] Priests were challenged in their attempts to control the activities of the Catholic population.[34] Even when legislation, for example to control dancehalls, was put in place many judges refused to accede to a local priest's objections.[35] This is not to say that the Catholic Church did not have a profound impact on how individuals understood their own sexuality and how they expressed that sexuality. But we still know too little about the expression of sexuality in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland to judge the nature of its repression.

'Before 1980, the prostitute was "pornographic" ', states Timothy Gilfoyle in his review essay on the historiography of prostitution.[36] Few historians were willing to engage with the subject and until the 1990s it was a topic untouched by Irish historians.[37] Since the 1980s there have been numerous studies of prostitution reflecting the changing landscape of social and cultural history, and the development of women's history and gender history. In her now classic study, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, Judith Walkowitz[38] explores in detail the impact of the CDAs in shaping class relations in England. She argues that prostitution offered many women better economic opportunities than they could find within industrial employment. These women were not, she contends, necessarily forced into prostitution; many of them were active agents in their own lives and controlled their labour through their sexuality.[39] While few Irish prostitutes appear to have become financially independent through their work, there is evidence to show that for some at least prostitution was a chosen occupation and often a seasonal one. It was also an occupation very much dictated by poverty and lack of employment opportunities. Walkowitz shows how prostitutes often exploited their

customers within the subculture they occupied. Clients, for instance, were robbed or assaulted when they went to the lodging-houses or brothels where prostitutes worked. This is also evident in the case of Irish prostitution. For many, in England, prostitution appears to have been a temporary occupation and working-class communities seem to have accepted former prostitutes into their midst without moralising. The same appears to be true for Ireland, particularly in the working-class districts of Dublin. Walkowitz reveals that while social reformers demanded more extensive anti-prostitution legislation, a strong feminist lobby successfully agitated for the repeal of the CDAs. The campaign for both the extension and repeal of the CDAs in Ireland was very much influenced by their British counterparts. Though neither movement was strong in Ireland, the campaigns offered Irish women an opportunity to argue for their political rights, as the best way in which vice could be eliminated from society.

Walkowitz's study is among a number of important works that have influenced this current book. Explorations of prostitution in the United States, for example, reveal the complex intertwining of urban life, social growth and class and gender identity. Ruth Rosen in *The Lost Sisterhood* investigates prostitution in the USA from 1900 to 1918.[40] She argues that the narratives on prostitution cannot be taken at face value and that for the period she is discussing prostitution was the 'symbol of an age' and that the narratives around it were a means for people to express their anxieties about the changing nature of US society. Prostitution was constructed to represent everything from the breakdown of traditional values to the growth of a youth culture centred around new forms of leisure.[41] To some extent similar trends can be seen in Ireland, particularly in the years after independence, when there was considerable anxiety about social change in the country. Rosen argues that the construction of the prostitute as a 'lost soul' was a creation of the progressive reform-driven society that attempted to rescue these women. In Ireland the prostitute was constructed as a 'seduced and abandoned' woman, who was in need of, and deserved, rescue. She was also, and at the same time, an infectious creature, a carrier of disease and immorality which was transferable to the respectable men and women of society. By the early twentieth century the prostitute in Ireland was, for some at least, an innocent corrupted by the presence of the British garrison, in need of saving from the British soldier. In time she became associated with unmarried motherhood, 'separation' women and the expression of sexuality by young Irish women. These constructions of the prostitute served the interests of rescue workers, advanced nationalists, suffragists and welfare workers. The real individual behind these constructions was often lost. There is nothing exceptional in the ways in which prostitution in Ireland was understood

or dealt with. Its meanings, whether in political or moral terms, are echoed in many other countries which were dealing with the problem of prostitution in this period. Rosen argues that for many women prostitution 'was simply a form of work; an obvious means of economic survival which occasionally offered some small degree of upward mobility'.[42] Prostitutes did not see themselves as outcasts. Rosen reveals the prostitute as a social actor, and through interviews conducted by progressive reformers marks prostitution as an occupation of choice for many women who later left it and went on to make other lives for themselves.

In her introduction to *The Comforts of Home* Luise White made a significant point by noting the ways in which historians dealt with the agency of individual prostitutes. White argued that many academic studies and descriptions of prostitution had adopted the language and attitudes of nineteenth-century reformers. The 'biological and cultural absolutes' expressed towards prostitutes 'in the clichés of nineteenth century outrage and control', have found a place in twentieth-century accounts of prostitution, where pollution and passivity seem to articulate the essence of a prostitute.[43] By adopting these terms, White argued, historians had missed more complex issues that demonstrated agency or economic influence in the towns and cities where prostitutes worked. The best histories, like White's own work, gives us some indication of who the women really were, what their day-to-day lives were like or how they saw themselves within their social and political frameworks. White argues that the economic power that women working as prostitutes wielded was a very significant feature of their impact on their communities and a vital part of the women's work. However, the quality of interpretation also depends on the availability of source material – a point Walkowitz drew attention to in 1980. The prostitute revealed by most of the documentary records is a woman created by those who watched and discussed her. In the case of Ireland these included the police, court reporters, workhouse officials, military authorities, priests and nuns and at times the general public. The resultant images are sometimes varied and contradictory and say as much about middle-class society and its fears and anxieties about health, discipline and order as they do about the women themselves. Our views on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century prostitute come from those who feared, despised, pitied or tolerated her.

Gail Hershatter's *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* identifies the major trends in the study of prostitution. Some studies evaluate the use of prostitution as a symbol of fear and change; other scholars of prostitution look for subjects with agency not just the victims of circumstances. However, whatever the approach it is the lack of sources that hampers most studies of prostitu-

tion. As Hershatter explains, prostitutes found a place in the historical record because of the reformers who wished to change, save, hide, relocate or cure them.[44] She argues that 'prostitution is always about the sale of sexual services, but much more can be learned from that transaction: about sexual meaning, about other social relations, about sex as a medium through which people talked about political power and cultural transformations, about nationhood and cultural identity'.[45] These are aspects that I attempt to cover in this book. A study of prostitution in Ireland adds to our understanding of Irish society more generally in this period; it also problematises the idea of Ireland as a nation of pure women and gallant men. It offers a history of a group of women who were often rejected by 'respectable' Irish society and a way of understanding how many Irish women survived in a hostile economic environment. It questions the control the Catholic Church had on the moral life of the very poor and destitute in nineteenth-century Ireland in particular. It is telling that it was a lay Catholic organisation, in association with a small number of clerics, rather than the civil authorities, who managed to close down the brothel system in Dublin in the 1920s. Prostitution was a subject that the Catholic Church appeared to have difficulty in controlling. Reform efforts, mainly concerned with 'saving' the prostitute from her life of sin, are most evident in the myriad of Magdalen asylums and rescue homes that were established in Ireland from the mid-eighteenth century. These institutions did not offer a solution to prostitution or its causes, merely the possibility of reform to the women who decided to enter these establishments. The civil authorities did little to end prostitution and rarely intervened in this business unless public opinion forced them to act.

For Ireland we have no interviews or personal reminiscences of women who worked as prostitutes in the period of this study, 1800–1940. All that we know about prostitution in this period is mediated through police and criminal statistics, newspaper accounts of court scenes in which prostitutes appear and the opinions of medical men on women who worked as prostitutes. Indeed, much of the discussion that takes place around prostitution and sexual immorality in Ireland in this period is about issues other than prostitution. How prostitutes are represented in these sources is often shaped by the opinions and needs of those either writing letters to the press or by reporters often keen to amuse the readers of the paper with lively court cases. Concerns about disease, the encroachment of prostitutes into respectable geographical spaces, such as the main streets of Dublin, and the prominence of British soldiers on the streets are allied to the apparent corruption of young Irish women by the soldiers and the fight for suffrage among Irish women. In Ireland from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century attitudes to prostitution were

shaped by an amalgam of public health, moral, religious and legal concerns. At times some of these elements predominated, that predomination often being influenced by the context of political events. Hence, in the period after the foundation of the state religious and moral concerns came to the fore within the framework of political and social upheaval.

Reconstructing the story of prostitution in Ireland has involved exploring sources not often exploited by Irish historians. Among the most useful and valuable sources for this study have been the registers of Magdalen asylums that operated in Ireland from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The public's interest in Magdalen asylums surfaced in the 1990s and particularly in 1998 with the broadcast of a Channel Four documentary entitled *Sex in a Cold Climate* which relied on the evidence of a number of women who had been incarcerated in the Magdalen asylums in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s.[46] It was a powerful programme which provoked considerable controversy. It was this documentary which aroused Peter Mullan's interest in the Magdalen asylums and his film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, released in Ireland in October 2002, is based very closely on the stories told by the women in the documentary.[47] Mullan's film was well received by the critics, winning a major prize at the Venice film festival in 2002. The film took in over £250,000 in its first two weeks in Irish cinemas, and had earned over 2 million euros by the end of November 2002, an enormous sum in Irish film terms. It played in Ireland until January 2003.[48]

It is a passionate piece of film making. The story is set in Ireland in the mid-1960s and focuses on the plight of three young women, a rape victim, an unmarried mother and a young woman in an orphanage who is clearly an 'enticement' to young men. The young women are brutalised within the asylum. The nuns who run the asylum, particularly the nun in charge, are presented as greedy for money and we see the mother superior counting the laundry takings in a number of scenes. The nuns keep order through sarcasm and a belt, and the women are physically and spiritually abused, with one woman being sexually abused by a priest. They are not paid for their labour, are dressed in drab brown uniforms, sleep in a locked dormitory and are poorly fed while the nuns, witnessed behind a screen, eat well. Mullan uses some of the dialogue from the *Sex in a Cold Climate* documentary and transposes the stories of the women in the documentary from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s to the 1960s.

The film was released in Ireland at a time when the country was coming to terms with a decade of revelations of clerical sexual abuse and the physical and sexual abuse of children in Church-run industrial and reformatory schools. There is no doubt that the state, through its reliance on Catholic religious orders and congregations to run industrial and reformatory