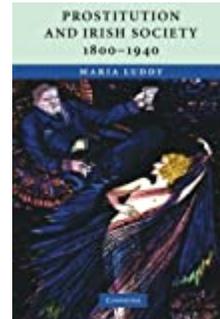


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Maria Luddy.** *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. viii + 352 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88241-5; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-70905-7.



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Maria Luddy's book *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940* is, to use a cliché, a groundbreaking work. Nothing like this study has previously been published in Irish historiography. While publications in both Irish social history and women's history have proliferated in the last thirty years, the topic of prostitution has remained, on the whole, untouched (apart from previous work by Luddy on "The Wrens of the Curragh," a colony of prostitutes who lived in the environs of the British military camp in county Kildare, Ireland). Luddy is well qualified to write this book, having written and edited numerous books on Irish women, Irish women's documentary history, and religious and philanthropic organizations. She is essentially the personification (along with earlier pioneers Margaret Mac Curtain and Mary Cullen, who continue to make significant contributions) and repository of the development of Irish women's history since the late 1970s. Indeed, among her numerous projects, she headed a government-funded team of historians in the late 1990s who identified fourteen thousand collections of sources (public and private, lay and religious) concerning women in Irish history throughout the island of Ireland. In *Prostitution and Irish Society*, she takes on the enormous challenge of writing the uncharted history of a pervasive group that have, up to now, been either ignored or briefly alluded to in passing. She succeeds in the task because of her great expertise in Irish and women's

history and her extensive archival knowledge.

It is clear that this book is based on years of research. It is crammed with data, statistics, and opinions that are quite staggering and that wipe away the widely held image of "Holy Ireland." Her abundance of sources, which includes official reports and investigations, censuses, church records, housing records, newspapers articles, and reports of charity rescue groups, also wipes away the idea that prostitutes are "hidden from history," and from historians. Luddy finds the evidence that they were not only there, but they were also everywhere from the big metropolises to small towns and villages. They were in organized brothels, in the back of tenements, outside military barracks, on particular sides of main streets, and in one-woman operations in the countryside. They were present in courtrooms (some of them repeatedly), gaols, lock hospitals, rescue shelters, laundries, county hospitals, and workhouses, as well as represented in literary works throughout the period. This demographic study meticulously shows where prostitutes resided, going into such detail as to give street names and numbers. While Luddy finds prostitutes all over Ireland, she also shows how prostitutes were gradually pushed into certain areas of larger cities and towns in Ireland, including the now infamous Monto District in Dublin.

Concerns about venereal disease, loose morals, un-

derage marriage, and white slave traffic weave their way throughout the book. The language and the context change as the reader moves into the twentieth century, as fears are expressed about the dangers and temptations of the cinema, motorcar, and dance hall. But the fears are the same nonetheless. Luddy argues throughout that the concern was rarely for the prostitute, but mostly for the impact she had on her surroundings, both local and national. Depending on who was doing the worrying and when, concern was expressed for British soldiers, Irish men, young girls (as yet uncontaminated by the act or by the disease), and Irish middle-class women who may have been affected by laws trying to restrict the movements, activities, and diseases of the prostitutes (such as the Contagious Diseases Acts).

As well as being a presence all over the country, as Luddy illustrates throughout the book, prostitution can be linked to central themes in modern Irish history, including British imperialism, Irish nationalism, the Potato Famine, the institutions of the Catholic and Protestant churches, the fight for women's suffrage, and the formative decades of the Irish Free State. She has an intriguing section in which she discusses how immorality and prostitution were perceived by nationalists as being a consequence of imperial rule, and an anathema to all things Irish. Their misperception becomes evident in the latter part of her book in which she examines the continuation of prostitution in independent Ireland. Likewise, she argues that the suffragists, too, exploited the institution of prostitution for their own gain; they used the plight of prostitutes symbolically to demonstrate their own limitations and legal restrictions. (This is a very interesting perspective as it contributes to the historiographical debate on the limitations of the women's suffrage movement in Ireland, as elsewhere, especially its matriarchal attitude and class-conscious aloofness.) However, neither the nationalists nor the suffragists, according to Luddy, were concerned with the root cause of prostitution. Perhaps, not all historians of the Irish suffragists might agree here, but it is a provocative idea. It is almost as if Luddy is suggesting that the nationalists and suffragists were "pimping" the topic to their own advantage

and to make their own case.

Not only is she knowledgeable, but she also is forceful. Luddy is not afraid to criticize others who have skirted around related areas of "fallen women" and their "rescuers," especially with regard to the (now well publicized) topic of the Magdalen Asylums (lay and religious shelters that took in "damaged" or "disgraced" girls and women who worked, often for free, in laundries and other enterprises). Over the last fifteen years or so, these institutions have inspired a number of varying publications, television documentaries, and a movie (*The Magdalen Sisters* [2002]). Luddy is not hesitant in dismissing generalizations in some portrayals, which are based on a few institutions in a particular time period. Nor is she reticent about disagreeing with the conclusions and perceptions of the media, the general public, and other historians on this topic, in some cases redeeming some asylums and their administrators.

The topic of male prostitution in this period is not discussed, nor is the topic of prostitution in the Irish diaspora. The former may be difficult since Luddy's sources are mostly connected to groups and individuals who, in one way or another, dealt with women. Perhaps, given the reticence, denial, and illegality of homosexuality, there may be many fewer sources for historians to investigate male prostitution in this time period. Admittedly, the latter, prostitutes in the diaspora, do not come within the boundaries of her study "Irish society"; however, such an investigation would be an interesting extension and complement to her work.

This is a very dense book that is full of references, citations, and sources. It is this density that makes it so valuable, providing numerous spin-off topics for future researchers and doctoral students who may be inspired by various geographic, thematic, and chronological perspectives that are woven throughout this work. Luddy's *Prostitution and Irish Society* is yet another important contribution to Irish historiography by one who has already contributed so much, and, undoubtedly, it has opened the door to further work in this area.

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