

*Penitent Prostitutes:
Redeemable Women in Eighteenth-Century London*

by

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On 10 August 1758 The Magdalen Hospital for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes opened in Whitechapel, not far from the Tower of London. Hospitals with charitable ends were not new to London, but the Magdalen is of particular interest to the historian of social welfare.¹

The idea for the Magdalen has been attributed to Robert Dingley (1710-1781), a prosperous Russia Company merchant in the City of London, but there was widespread support in mid-eighteenth-century London for the reform of prostitutes, as exemplified by a competition launched 14 April 1758 by The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. The Society invited gentlemen to submit plans for such a charity, and *The London Chronicle* promised to publish every plan.² The competition fell awry over diverging views and personality conflicts, but of greater moment are the reasons why that particular charity seemed worthwhile for that time and place.

Relief of prostitutes had ancient precedents. Leaving aside St. Mary Magdalen's ambiguous past, Jesus kept the company of sinners, and as the prostitute represented the fullness of sin, her repentance symbolized the fullness of redemption. Demetrios Constantelos writes of a late fourth-century Byzantine house for "fallen women of the aristocratic class," and of Empress Theodora establishing in the sixth century a convent to redeem prostitutes, appropriately named *Metanoia*, or "Repentance." In the eleventh century the Byzantine Emperor, Michael IV, built a hospital "to house harlots who were ready to reform." This initiative reached the Latin West, as exemplified by the establishment in 1629 of the *Filles de Bon Pasteur*, "a charity which housed repentant prostitutes" in Aix-en-Provence.³

The idea apparently reached England by way of the British mercantile diaspora on the Continent. Enclaves of merchants were located in such cities as Lisbon, Hamburg and St. Petersburg. Organized as factories (where factors traded), they acted as transmitters of ideas as well as commercial centers. Merchants who lived in such communities, or who worked with those who had, were likely to develop strong patriotic and religious views because exposure to foreign cultures meant that they could not take their own heritage for granted. At the same time, ideas of foreign derivation could be appealing to them when they seemed beneficial to British national and commercial interests.

In short, merchants who returned from a stint in a foreign factory to the companies and coffee houses of eighteenth-century London might well become catalysts for change. This was particularly true of the Russia Company, whose members in the eighteenth

century shared a very prosperous trade with an exotic foreign power. The result was a particular bent toward philanthropy designed to serve practical ends. Although Robert Dingley, founder of the Magdalen, had not served abroad, his brother, Charles, had, as had his friend, Jonas Hanway (1712-1786), the principal director of the Magdalen's early years. Both were also members of the Russia Company. So too were Robert and William Wilberforce, father and uncle to the William Wilberforce of the next generation who led the fight against the slave trade, abolished in 1807. There was also the immensely wealthy John Thornton, father of Henry Thornton, a leader of the "Clapham Sect" in the early nineteenth century. The mid-eighteenth-century Russia merchants were not the fathers of the Victorians, but their grandfathers, and the precursors of the Evangelical Movement, who combined patriotism, wealth, religious zeal and philanthropy into a powerful engine for constructive reform.⁴

That is the larger context, but it remains to link the Magdalen with the well-intentioned and well-endowed Russia Company merchants. Mid-eighteenth century Britain competed for trade and empire with larger and more populous states on the Continent. There was uncertainty over whether the British population was growing or shrinking (cheap gin was ravaging London, and the first national census was half a century away). Migration to North America, Africa and Asia seemed likely to increase.⁵ It therefore seemed prudent to improve the population in a triple sense--number, character and skills. A reformed prostitute could be triply helpful in this effort--by becoming a productive worker, by birthing productive workers, and by not reducing the productivity of others. While hospitals for prostitutes had the stigma of popish precedents, the practical benefits of reform made it worth considering what Hanway called "The Customs of Foreign Nations in Regard to Harlots," to give the title of a two-volume study he wrote on behalf of the Magdalen.

In 1756 Britain was engaged in the opening rounds of the Seven Years War with France, and there was anxiety that, whatever the outcome of the current conflict, Britain could not long prevail against its more populous neighbor just across the Channel. It is not coincidental that 1756 also marked a surge of charitable activity in London. The most dramatic example was the decision of Parliament to underwrite the costs of all infants brought to the Foundling Hospital of London.⁶ A less ambitious but more productive initiative of the same year was the establishment of the Marine Society for the purpose of sending young boys and men to sea, properly equipped and motivated. The Magdalen, founded two years later, was quite openly part of this chain.

The purpose in assisting foundlings to reach maturity, and in helping prostitutes attain a good future was, in the words of Hanway, "to recruit the nation."⁷ The Marine Society, which Hanway founded, was remarkably successful because it offered immediate returns in young sailors, but the Foundling and Magdalen hospitals were long-term investments in a more populous Britain.

The theoretical construct that best explains the motivation of London merchants is Christian mercantilism.⁸ Although there were Jewish merchants in London, such as Sampson Gideon, who supported such charities, the greater part were Anglicans. These fathers of the Evangelicals saw their benevolence not only as in the national interest, but as Christian charity. Mercantilist and Christian interests seemed in perfect harmony.

On the other hand, charities designed to help those deemed incapable of much productive labor, such as the disabled or the aged, and charities targeted toward an insignificant number of persons, such as the chimney sweeps' young apprentices, seemed less attractive to the Christian mercantilist. This stands in dramatic contrast to the mainstream of British social welfare history since the Tudor poor laws, in which the deserving poor were, in part, equated with those incapable of helping themselves (the impotent), while the able-bodied were often considered lazy, wicked, and possibly dangerous. The Christian mercantilist might not dispute that characterization. Hanway considered the general run of seamen "common whores" (his underlining) in their restless and dissolute living, while he did not think fifty hospitals would ruin the prostitute's trade.⁹ It did not matter, for the past history of the recipient was irrelevant, as long as the end result was a more productive individual.

For this reason, Christian mercantilists (not all of whom, by the way, were Russia Company merchants) supported a series of interrelated charities. The Magdalen Hospital's first site in Whitechapel was formerly the infirmary of the London Hospital. The Lock Hospital and the Misericordia, both founded for the treatment of venereal diseases, were closely linked to the Magdalen. A quarter of the Marine Society's founders were also Foundling Hospital governors, and members of the Court of Assistants, the Russia Company's executive body. Of the Magdalen's first general committee meeting of 28 June 1758, eight of the twenty-two members were Russia Merchants, seven were in the Marine Society, and six in the Troop Society (a charity to help soldiers, and a complement to the more extensive assistance Christian mercantilists gave to seamen).¹⁰

This web of connections was a natural result of a single, inspiring idea--to redeem the redeemable, as an act of charity and patriotism. However, because these charities were so closely linked to the mercantile world of men, the role of women was circumscribed. Women were welcome to donate funds. They might also influence their male acquaintances, serve as employees of the charities--or as its beneficiaries. However, leadership was reserved for men.

Sarah Scott's A Description of Millenium Hall, published in 1762, which concerned a charity school established by five ladies, is a commentary on the limited role women were in actuality permitted to play in the charitable foundations of eighteenth-century London. That said, it is pleasant to record that the largest single donor to the founding of the Magdalen was an unknown lady who had a winning lottery ticket, and gave 500 pounds. The second largest sum was 200 pounds from a woman's estate. Women, in theory, could be governors of the charity, for all that was required was a suitable donation (20 guineas for a life governorship). Dingley specifically stated that ladies could vote, or give their proxy. In the case of the Misericordia Hospital there were actually two of one hundred fifty-two governors who were women. Again, all that was required was a level of giving. Tokens aside, making the key decisions were prosperous and pious male merchants, sitting in committees around green-clothed tables.¹¹

What of the women who applied to enter the Magdalen? The evidence is anecdotal, as the internal records of the Hospital are apparently no longer extant.¹² The most common entrant appears to have been someone in her late teens or early twenties. William Hogarth's engravings of the Harlot's Progress gives the classic example of the

innocent country girl led astray, and the emotional sermons of the Reverend William Dodd, the Hospital's first chaplain, titillated wealthy and well-born visitors to the chapel with tales of falls from grace. Hanway wrote of such cases. There is a novel attributed to Sarah Fielding, The Histories of Some of the Penitents of the Magdalen House as Supposed to be Related by Themselves (1760) which is informative of gentle sentiments. There was an element of prurience in much of this, but certainly in the case of Dodd and Hanway it was designed to open pocketbooks. Still, a more common entrant was doubtless the case of Elizabeth Lively, whose story comes from an unusual parish book kept by St. Martin, Vintry, in the City of London. Although occurring half a century later, it has the virtue of being an actual case.

She was eighteen when she came to the notice of the vestry clerk, as a settled parishioner by virtue of her father having rented premises in the parish at a rent of thirty-six pounds for a year (a ten-pound annual rental brought a settlement, meaning the right to receive poor relief in a particular parish). She therefore came from a relatively prosperous home, but "this last two months has been unfortunate, and taken from a house of ill-fame in St. Mary Newington and passed to us." The clerk gave her an order for admittance to Showell's, Bear Lane, a commercially run workhouse, until she was cured of an unnamed illness, and could "get a place of service." Admitted in October of 1818, she was discharged in late March of the following year, and given a set of new clothes. Her father promised he would look after her. However, the following February the clerk recorded:

Came again in great distress, having lived five months in a Respectable place, Miss Green's Boarding School, Kensington Square, and left there to go and live with a young man in Westminster.

Once again, she was sent to Bear Lane, "when she was found upon examination to be injured; sent her to Guy's Hospital to be cured." The final entry was in September of 1821 when the clerk reported that Elizabeth, now aged twenty-one, had entered the Magdalen Hospital, while her father was admitted to a privately endowed almshouse at Sion College. Her father had been judged of some worth, given his admittance to a selective charity for the deserving poor. She, too, was treated reasonably well, although the workhouse in Bear Lane could not have been a pleasant place (this parish, as others, often used the workhouse "test", a threat to poor parishioners who appealed for outdoor--that is, out-of-workhouse--relief). When she entered the Magdalen it was the third attempt to redeem her. What happened thereafter is unknown, but she may have found some sort of redemption, in life or death, for she disappears from the vestry clerk's book.¹³

That she was admitted to the Magdalen suggests that she was considered redeemable, both in the sense that she repented of her past sins and could become a productive member of society. Young women, with some assets in background, character, family and friends, were the best candidates for admission. Donna Andrew has called the Magdalen inmates "the 'cream' of fallen women," whose mission was to serve as an example to others.¹⁴ That may exaggerate, but certainly the Magdalen found it possible to be selective for it was designed as an attractive haven, with free medical attention, a generous diet, confidentiality, counseling, treatment in accordance with the

inmate's station in life, opportunity to appeal if an employee's conduct was inappropriate, and job placement when they were ready to leave, usually into domestic service.

On the other hand, they were forced to wear grey uniforms, and to remain within the hospital's precincts until they were discharged. In addition, they were not permitted contact with their outside friends, and could see a male, even one of the governors, only in the presence of a matron. They were required to follow a strict regimen in which most of their hours awake had to be spent in work or prayer. If they decided to leave before they were considered ready to be discharged, there was no door by which to return, and if they misbehaved they might face expulsion.

Such evidence as survives, chiefly in the form of pamphlets and charity appeals, suggest that the Hospital was well-managed, at least in the eighteenth century. Of the 2,500 inmates in the twenty-eight years Hanway served as governor about three-fifths were restored successfully to society. Selectivity at entrance doubtless helped, but so too did efforts in relocating the women -- acting as intermediaries with their families, providing small marriage portions, giving monetary awards for women who stayed off the streets, and finding them jobs. Hanway took a personal interest in the Magdalen penitents, and John Pugh, his secretary and first biographer, wrote that a visit to Hanway's home in Red Lion Square was productive of a friendly ear and a small present.¹⁵

Success in a good cause is often the foundation of future failure. The initial site of the Hospital, near the Tower, was considered inadequate, and in 1772 the Hospital reopened in St. George's Fields, south of the Thames. The consequence was to remove the charity further from the view of many of the charitable, and thus hurt funding. In the next century the Hospital moved yet again, still further away from the center, to Streatham. Decline in charitable giving was partially offset in the new location by the establishment of a profitable laundry.

The second and more central problem is that the Magdalen became a model for other institutions, both in London and elsewhere in the British Isles. The original Magdalen had attracted penitents who were not Londoners and donations from beyond the seas. New institutions competed with the old, both for penitents and financial support.

Still, the Magdalen Hospital survived to the mid-twentieth century. In 1934 the charity was taken over by the state, and shortly thereafter its title was shortened simply to "The Magdalen Hospital." By the 1930s the Hospital was no longer a voluntary refuge, but a place to incarcerate delinquent girls, although some attempt to reform them was maintained. Its last incarnation was as a clearing house for delinquent girls, where they could be processed before being sent on to other institutions for rehabilitation. Nevertheless, the Hospital's second historian, S. B. P. Pearce, claimed in 1958 that the Hospital was doing "in a scientific manner" what had been done "by those first brave few" in the eighteenth century.¹⁶

And yet the Magdalen did not long outlast its bicentenary. There is something of a mystery at the end. When I made inquiry, the Department of Health and Social Security knew nothing of the Hospital, while the Charity Commission thought it was still in Streatham. A journey to Streatham in 1973 revealed, however, that the Hospital had been replaced by blocks of flats, and a custodian of the flats, a former employee of the

Magdalen, said that the Magdalen had been closed and razed shortly after its bicentenary in 1958.

While relocation and competition partly explain the declining fortunes of the Hospital, the increasing role of the state in social welfare played a major part as well, and indeed was intimately connected with the Hospital's loss of mission. On a larger canvas, it may be argued that the notion of penitence suffered declining appeal in a more secular age, and that the initial motivation of the Christian mercantilists seemed much less urgent after Malthus and the national censuses suggested that population increase might not be beneficial, especially as the threat of France receded. Indeed, the Magdalen might have gone under earlier, except that institutions often survive the motives which led to their foundation. Lugubrious sentiment and simple charity kept the Hospital alive through the Victorian era and well into this century.

For the history of women, the Magdalen represents still another instance of how closely woven are the threads of patriarchy. However, the nineteenth century would see a vastly increased role for women in social welfare. As F. K. Prochaska writes, "With a genius for fund-raising and organization women fundamentally altered the shape and the course of philanthropy, expanding and redirecting it into channels which suited their perceptions of society and its problems."¹⁷

In all the changes outlined above lies the demise of what the Hospital's first historian called "a Great Charity."¹⁸ And so it was.

NOTES

1. My thanks to Diane Willen of Georgia State University for her helpful commentary and criticism of the initial draft of this paper.

2. The best account of Robert Dingley is John H. Appleby, "Robert Dingley FRS (1710-1781): Merchant, Architect and Pioneering Philanthropist," Notes Rec. R. Soc. Lond. 45 (2) (1991): 139-54. Dingley is scheduled to be included in the new edition of The Dictionary of National Biography. For the competition, see The London Chronicle, 14 April 1758, 3: 353. As good as its word, The Chronicle published several plans in subsequent weeks, at varying levels of practicality.

3. Demetrios J. Constantelos, Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1968), 196, 271-73; Cissie C. Fairchild, Poverty and Charity in Aix-en-Provence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 19. The association of Mary Magdalen with prostitution rests on a dubious reading of Luke, 7: 37-50; 8:1-2, and is increasingly questioned by scholars, as in Rosemary Haughton, The Recreation of Eve (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1985), 58.

4. The allusion is to Ford K. Brown, Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961). Brown makes no reference to the Russia Company connection. The embryonic prosopography is based on comparison of the Russia Company Court Minute Books, Guildhall Library (London), MSS 11,741, with the records of The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (formerly

The Foundling Hospital), The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the Marine Society, and other established charities of the eighteenth century. The first two of the above have manuscript records in their London offices, as does the Marine Society, although most of the latter's records are in The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. No manuscript archive appears to exist for the now defunct Magdalen Hospital, and its history must be traced derivatively from records of other charities, and in the prolific pamphlet literature concerning the Hospital, and for the early years, the accounts of Jonas Hanway, especially The Rules, Orders and Regulations of the Magdalen House (London: By Order of the Governors, 1759), and Letters Written Occasionally on the Customs of Foreign Nations in Regard to Harlots (London: Printed for John Rivington, 1761).

5. Population and migration particularly concerned Jonas Hanway, as in his two-volume compendium, Virtue in Humble Life (London: Printed for J. Dodsley & Brotherton & Sewel, 1774), 1: xxiii.
6. The Foundling Hospital, chartered by the crown in 1739, was the most prestigious of London's charitable institutions, and employed the talents of such men as William Hogarth and George Frederick Handel, whose Messiah was regularly performed at charity concerts in the 1750s. In 1756 Parliament underwrote the costs of the Hospital in taking all infants brought to its doors, wherever and however far they were from. This monumental and expensive undertaking ended in 1761. For the best account, see Ruth McClure, Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
7. Jonas Hanway, Letters on the Importance of the Rising Generation of the Labouring Part of Our Fellow-Subjects (London: Printed for A. Millar, et al., 1767) 1: 87. For Hanway, see James Stephen Taylor, Jonas Hanway: Founder of the Marine Society: Charity and Policy in Eighteenth-Century Britain (London: Scholar Press, 1985).
8. Charles Wilson, in "The Other Face of Mercantilism," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th Series, 9 (1959): 81-101, showed that the mercantilist of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries could and did justify support for social welfare on political and economic grounds; he called this "social mercantilism." The most apt term to describe the mid-eighteenth century is "Christian mercantilism," given the beliefs and motivations behind most of the associated philanthropies of that time, such as The Marine Society and the Magdalen Hospital.
9. Jonas Hanway, Reasons for an Augmentation of at least Twelve Thousand Mariners (London: Sold by R. & J. Dodsley, 1759), 16; A Plan for Establishing a Charity-House or Charity-Houses for the Reception of Repenting Prostitutes (London: n.p., 1758), 17.
10. The most helpful source on the inception of the Magdalen are Hanway's The Rules, Orders and Regulations of the Magdalen House, previously cited. There are, however, two good histories of the Magdalen, written in this century: H.F. B. Compston, The Magdalen Hospital: The Story of a Great Charity (London: SPCK, 1917); and S. B. P. Pearce, An Ideal in the Working: The Story of Magdalen Hospital, 1758 to 1958 (London: Skinner, 1958). Neither history of the Magdalen, however, explores the inter-locking charity directorates of mid-eighteenth-century London.
11. Sarah Scott, A Description of Millenium Hall, ed. Walter M. Crittenden (New York: Bookman Associates, 1955). Scott had connections with Hanway and his circle through the Montagu family--her older sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, was a close friend and supporter of Hanway.
12. When the Hospital closed there were some endowments and possibly records in the hands of solicitors, but repeated enquiries proved fruitless. John Appleby in the previously cited article on Robert Dingley states that "some (mostly printed) hospital records are held in the Minet Library, Lambeth Archives Department"

(p. 153). Diane Willen has suggested that much might be done with wills. It is possible that a determined scholar may yet unearth enough material to give us a fuller history of the internal workings of this charity.

13. Examination of the Poor, 1815-29, St. Martin, Vintry, MS 2847, Guildhall Library, London. Underlinings are the vestry clerk's.

14. Donna Andrew, Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 124. Andrew thought the recipe for entrance was to be truly repentant, not pregnant, under thirty, and not too experienced. However, Robert Dingley applied to the Foundling Hospital in 1766 for the admission of three children born to women in the Magdalen, according to McClure, Coram's Children, 140.

15. The Magdalen success rate is extolled in John Butler, Sermon Preached in the Chapel of the Magdalen Hospital (London: Printed for the Benefit of the Charity, 1786). For the personal dimension to Hanway's life, the indispensable source is John Pugh, Remarkable Occurrences in the Life of Jonas Hanway (London: Printed by J. Davis, 1787).

16. Pearce, An Ideal in the Working, 80.

17. F. K. Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy: Nineteenth-Century England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 223. Indeed, the central role women played in philanthropy over the centuries needs emphasis. See, for example, Diane Willen, in "Women in the Public Sphere in Early Modern England: The Case of the Urban Working Poor," Sixteenth-Century Journal 19 (3) (1988): 559-75. However, policy-making, at least in the eighteenth century, was very much in the hands of men, as it was in public provision through the poor laws. These are large questions, and all that is argued here is that the mercantile nature of London philanthropies at the time contributed to restricting women's roles in charity administration.

18. Compston, The Magdalen Hospital, the subtitle.