

Sex in a Cold Climate (1998)

In 1998, Testimony Films released the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*, which reported the true stories of four survivors from the Magdalene asylums in Ireland in the twentieth century. Magdalene asylums, also called Magdalene laundries and homes, were institutions of the Catholic Church that sought to reform women engaged in prostitution and those who birthed children out of wedlock by forcing the women to do hard labor. Directed by Steve Humphries, the documentary interlocks four survivors' stories of how they came to inhabit a Magdalene asylum, what occurred to them there, and how they eventually freed themselves. An Irish film festival first screened the documentary, which became the inspiration for the 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters*. *Sex in a Cold Climate* brought attention to the stories of women who survived Magdalene asylums, which prompted additional research and eventual justice for many of the women.

Humphries founded Testimony Films in 1992. In addition to producing *Sex in a Cold Climate*, the company has released films on various topics, including the US 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, UK women on death row, and how to keep children safe from sexual predators. Testimony Films has won numerous awards for their films and, as of 2018, continues to produce documentaries.

In the twentieth century, Magdalene asylums were prevalent in Ireland, a country where many individuals belong to the Catholic Church and follow the church's teachings. Catholic doctrine discouraged the discussion of contraception, abortion, and sex education. Many Catholic churches did charitable work in the communities. The Magdalene asylums were run by Catholic nuns, who sought to reform prostitutes in the tradition of Mary Magdalene, a biblical figure whom some Christians have interpreted to have been a prostitute reformed by Jesus Christ. However, the asylums also institutionalized women who were not prostitutes, including women who conceived children out of wedlock, women with disabilities, and women whose family members or city leaders deemed too beautiful. Women in the Magdalene asylums were forced to do hard labor, often laundering clothes, to absolve their sins and seek forgiveness from the Catholic god. In *Sex in a Cold Climate*, survivors of those asylums told their stories of surviving in Ireland's Magdalene asylums.

Sex in a Cold Climate documents the stories of Bridgid, Phyllis, Christina, and Martha, who all spent time in separate Magdalene asylums in Ireland at different times in the twentieth century. In the documentary, the women tell their stories through interviews that the narrator connects. Film critic Jeff Vice has written that the documentary is as basic as filmmaking gets. The documentary features interlocking clips from separate interviews that are overlaid with brief black and white archival footage to separate the women's stories.

The documentary begins with black and white footage of a church, where nuns are singing and priests are saying mass. That footage continues intermittently throughout the rest of the documentary between the women's interview segments. The documentary's narrator, Dervla Kirwan, begins by stating that the Catholic Church has the highest moral authority in Ireland. Kirwan claims that priests take a vow of celibacy while nuns live a life of self-denial, and that chastity is the only way to protect one's self from the sin of sex. She states that individuals who belong to the Catholic Church believe that sex outside of marriage is as much a sin as murder, and then goes on to describe how unwed mothers, whom she calls Magdalenes, embody that sin. Kirwan also states that by the 1940s, the majority of inmates at the Magdalene asylums were unwed mothers. The documentary then introduces the four women who are profiled in the film, Bridgid, Phyllis, Christina, and Martha.

The documentary introduces the interviewees who share the experiences that led to them being placed in the Magdalene asylums. Bridgid, born in 1939, recounts that she grew up in an orphanage that adjoined a Magdalene asylum. According to the documentary, Bridgid was the only interviewee

who did not live in a Magdalene asylum, though she experienced similar hardships in the orphanage. Bridgid describes a weekly ritual the nuns performed at the orphanage in which they had the girls strip naked. The nuns laughed and compared their bodies. Although others reportedly thought Bridgid was the daughter of a woman in a Magdalene asylum, Bridgid claims that the nuns forbid any contact with the asylum residents. The nuns of the orphanage told Bridgid and the other orphans that the women in the Magdalene asylum were women of the devil.

The documentary also introduces Martha, born in 1927. Martha states that she was sent to a Magdalene asylum after being raped at age fourteen by a family member. In the documentary, she says she confided in a female cousin, who told the rest of her family. Martha was sent to an asylum the next day. The documentary then introduces Phyllis, born in 1940, who also grew up in an orphanage. At age of fifteen, Phyllis was offered employment at one of the Magdalene asylums. She recounts high walls and intricate security measures when describing her arrival at the asylum. As Phyllis describes, upon entering the asylum, her long hair was cut off to her ears, and the nuns told her that she was too pretty to remain at the orphanage. The nuns at the orphanage said Phyllis would have gotten pregnant outside of the asylum, so they sent her there so she would not get in any trouble. Phyllis notes in the documentary that, when she asked what she would be getting paid to work in the laundry, the nuns laughed at her and said they controlled how long she would be there.

Lastly, *Sex in a Cold Climate* also details the story of Christina, born in 1918. When Christina was an adolescent, a man told Christina that the only way for him to love her was if she had sex with him. Christina states that there was no sexual education in Ireland, so she had sex with that man, not knowing she would get pregnant. In the documentary, Christina describes giving birth to a son and raising him for the first few months of his life in one of Ireland's mother and baby homes where unwed mothers went to have children. The mother and baby homes were also run by Catholic nuns and were closely affiliated with Magdalene laundries. Christina states that she wrote the infant's father letters each week, but later realized the nuns had been intercepting the letters and not sending them. In the film, Christina says she would have married that man and that she loved him.

Christina then details how she was separated from her infant and how that influenced her eventual stay in the Magdalene asylum. In the documentary, she says that while she was breastfeeding her infant, she was called into a nun's chamber. The nun informed her that she would be transferred to a Magdalene asylum and that the infant would be moved to an orphanage. Christina was unable to say goodbye to her infant. When Christina asked the nun whether she could go to her parents' home, the nun informed her that they had disowned Christina for having a child out of wedlock. She states that, while she was in the asylum, she asked the nuns every day when she could be reunited with her infant.

Midway through the documentary, the women share what they consider to be traumatizing events they experienced while living and working at the Magdalene asylum. Many women were immediately separated from their infants after childbirth, and Phyllis relays stories of women who were desperate to find their children at the asylum. Phyllis states that she remembers seeing nuns slap women across the face and watching as nuns tied them to the ground and beat them with rubber paddles. Martha explains that, if a woman committed a minor infraction or made a mistake while laundering clothing, the nuns would force the woman to kneel at the feet of the nun and beg for forgiveness.

Midway through the documentary, Christina explains what she learned happened to her infant. Six months after her arrival at the asylum, Christina was informed her infant had been put into foster care out of Ireland. Christina tells the documentarians that she stopped working and that a nun warned her that if she continued to abstain from work, she would get beaten with a belt. Christina relays that she told the nun that if she hit her, Christina would kill the nun. As a result, the nuns forced Christina to seek absolution for her sins and attend daily confessionals. During one such confessional, Christina states that the priest exposed his genitals to her. She tells the documentarians that that priest was not a man of god.

For Bridgid, life at the orphanage was comparable to what the other women interviewed in the

documentary experienced, though Bridgid was never a patient at a Magdalene asylum. Bridgid recounts how she got in trouble with the nuns for communicating with one of the Magdalene penitents. Bridgid had promised one of the women that she would bring her child to see her through a gate. The mother had not seen the child in several years. A nun saw the exchange and quickly intercepted Bridgid, taking her back to the orphanage. The nun beat Bridgid with a black rubber paddle and shaved her head entirely.

Bridgid also recounts a story of sexual assault within the documentary. According to Bridgid, she was assaulted by a priest during a private Bible lesson before the age of sixteen. She claims he wrapped his legs around her and began rubbing his body on hers. He masturbated in front of her and ejaculated on her dress. She states that she had no idea what was going on and was very confused because she had had no sex education. In the film, she says that the priest acted similarly on many occasions, always before he gave mass on Sunday mornings.

The film concludes by telling the audience what happened to each woman. At age seventeen, Bridgid was free to leave the orphanage of her own accord in 1956, and later married. However, she claims she never forgot her sexual abuse. Phyllis was released from her employment at the asylum after eight years and then married a man and had children. She states that it was difficult to have a sexual relationship with her husband because the nuns conditioned her to believe any sexual touch was wrong. He later divorced her. Christina reveals she escaped the asylum and was taken in by a friend. She fled to Northern Ireland to work as a nurse. She married and had a family. She did not inform them about her first child until six months prior to her interview in *Sex in a Cold Climate*. The narrator notes that Christina's family helped her find her son. She died in 1997, six months after meeting her firstborn son. Martha describes her cousin freeing her from the asylum after four years. Martha claims that she never got married because she never wanted anyone to have power over her again. The narrator states that the last Magdalene asylum in Ireland closed in 1996 and that, while it is unknown how many penitents went through the asylums, researchers estimate 30,000 women were patients at Magdalene asylums throughout the twentieth century. Kirwan indicates that those women who survived the asylums shared a lasting hostility toward the Catholic Church.

Sex in a Cold Climate received multiple awards, including a Hugo Award at the Chicago International Film Festival in Chicago, Illinois. It was the inspiration for the 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters* and served as background for the 2013 film, *Philomena*. In 2015, historian and researcher Catherine Corless uncovered a mass grave of infant skeletons in a septic tank underneath one of the most famous mother and baby homes in Ireland. After that discovery, media stations around the world began broadcasting the stories of survivors from both Magdalene asylums and mother and baby homes, encouraging the Catholic Church and even the United Nations to issue an apology for violating the survivors' civil rights.

Sources

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