

*Magdalene Nuns and Penitent Prostitutes, Valletta.* By Christine Muscat. Malta: BDL Publishing, 2013. 255 pp. €45. ISBN 978-99987-33-96-4.

I first came across the Magdalenes while reading for aPh.D at the University of Cambridge. It was a fleeting encounter, as the encounters of most men with these women in the early modern period tended to be. I was going through a document from the Tribunal of the Roman Inquisition of Malta dated 1606. The person under investigation was none other than the Spanish Hospitaller Chaplain Frà Pietro Rea Camarasa, Prior of the Conventual Church of St John. It was alleged that some years before, when this priest was the confessor to the Nuns of St Ursula (not far from the Magdalene's church and monastery), his behaviour had been far from ideal. He had sex with the nuns, including the Mother Superior and among other things he enjoyed letting the nuns comb his beard. At one point – presumably because of his behaviour – he was transferred away from the nuns of St Ursula to the Magdalenes, to the institution for repentant women. Whether from a seventeenth- or twenty-first-century perspective, it seems hardly the most sensible decision for a man of his inclinations; as one can imagine, his behaviour with the Magdalenes was similar as what it had been with the nuns of St Ursula.

While this was an intriguing story, at the time I came across it I was delving into other subjects, so I did not follow it up; at the back of my mind, however, I hoped I would get the chance to go back to these apparently mysterious women. In European historiography (Monica Chojnacka, Mary Laven, Silvia Evangelisti, and others), the study of female religious life has seen great leaps in recent years, particularly as the focus has shifted from dry institutional accounts to vibrant narratives of women who were constrained by their cultures but who also found niches of opportunity. Maltese historical studies about female (and male) religious life still need to catch up with these exciting historiographical trends. Christine Muscat's book is a first, very important step in this direction.

This book ultimately knows its genesis in the taught-MA programme in Hospitaller Studies offered by the Department of History at the University of Malta. It was an intensive and challenging programme of studies: three meetings a week of four hours each,

endless reading lists, sixthree-hour exam papers and a dissertation. The rigour of this preparation shows through in the thoroughness that went into the preparation of the book. What started out as a dissertation was transformed into an expanded, handsomely-presented volume that will inform its readers on a subject on which many misconceptions exist, while also pointing out further avenues of research.

Following a brief section that sets the historical and physical scene in which the Magdalene nuns need to be understood, the book unfolds into ten thematic chapters, an epilogue and appendix material. Chapters 1 and 2 are closely linked to each other as they outline the historical, social, economic, intellectual and theological background that informed opinion about, and the status of women in early modern societies. This, invariably, created the conditions that made the establishment of the Magdalene institution in Malta (and elsewhere) possible. The third chapter deals with 'Hospitalier women'. Here, the author, reminds readers that women were members of the Order from its early days in Jerusalem, even if never in positions of influence that equalled those of the male brethren. She then dissects the evidence that explain when, where and why the Magdalene monastery was established in Malta in the late sixteenth century. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 cover the various aspects of the administration and life of the women in the Magdalene monastery over the years, including issues which from time to time divided the women among themselves.

The seventh chapter is particularly important because of the light it sheds on the economic activities which the Magdalene nuns were involved in, particularly their extensive real estate interests. Muscat's choice of the term 'cloistered entrepreneurs' is a significant one that holds a lot of potential for future research about female religious and their economic interactions with the wider society. Chapter 8 deals with the fabric of the monastery and the surviving church, explaining their development and reminding readers that they were once home to important works of arts, including works by Mattia Preti. The ninth chapter is one of the most intriguing as it deals with the way the Magdalenes tried to prepare for death, a process which was both spiritual and temporal; in fact, they even had a 'Fund for the Dead' (also referred to, very tellingly, as the 'Anguish Fund') with which to ensure that 'all

members of their community would have adequate spiritual coverage to secure their place in heaven' (182). Chapter 10, 'Suppression', and the Epilogue narrate how the Magdalene monastery was suppressed by the French revolutionary authorities that took over Malta in 1798 and what happened thereafter. Since the Magdalene monastery was not reconstituted after 1800 and since much of the physical structure was destroyed during the Second World War, the memory of these women was doomed to fade away. Importantly, however, this book should serve to raise awareness about the church of the Magdalenes, the only physical remnant that is still left of their presence in Valletta. The authorities that have the possibility and means to safeguard and restore this building need to take heed so that it might be given a scope that will give it a future.

This book represents an important milestone for Maltese historiography. It is important because it reflects a current of thought and practice, which hopefully will grow stronger in our own lifetime. This is a current of thought which moves history away from great men, great deeds and antiquarian parochialism to a recognition that the past is complex, untidy, pluralistic and that it belongs to all. Muscat, in her book, focuses on the story of a set of women who were often the underdogs of early modern society; but is their story worth remembering? The emphatic answer is 'yes'. Muscat is here doing justice to one particular minority in Malta's past; other minorities still await to have light shed upon their past and their history: children, the elderly, the differently able, homosexuals, migrants of all backgrounds, and so on. This, one hopes, will be the path of the future for historical studies in Malta.

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