

Making visible the truth of the Galway Magdalen Laundry

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Understanding the Galway Magdalen Laundry

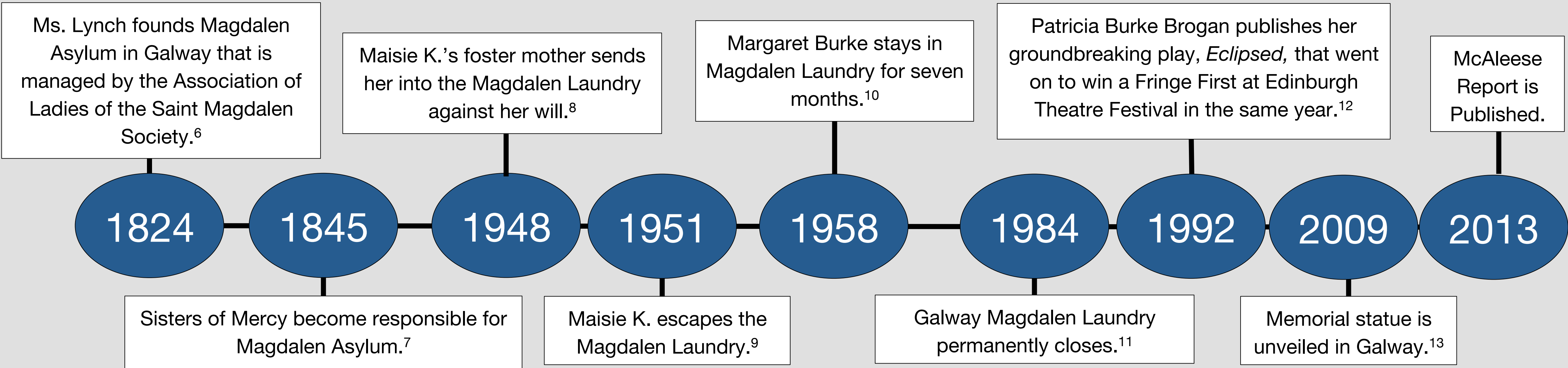
The Galway Magdalen Laundry, an institution run by the Sisters of Mercy and located on Foster Street, operated as a commercial laundry until its closure in 1984. It confined “fallen” women to lives of prayer, silence, and servitude through work without pay as they washed their community’s dirty linen. Women entered the Laundry through the Sisters of Mercy Industrial School in Lenaboy, the Tuam Baby Home, the courts, the Department of Health, or were committed by family members or local clergy.¹

The living conditions in the Galway Magdalen Laundry, exposed through survivor testimonies, stand in stark contrast to those reported in Chapter 19 of the McAleese Report. Survivor testimonies make evident the abuse that occurred behind the locked doors of the institution and the ways in which the State discredits the experiences of survivors.

Archived publications make evident that the public was aware of the Laundry, and that the institution was a prominent part of the local community; the gross human rights violations in the Laundry were no secret. Responsible parties must be exposed and held accountable by accessing historical documents and survivor testimony, regardless of the State’s intent to minimize such abuse.

Making Visible the Truth of the Galway Magdalen Laundry

Meghan Dougherty, Sophia Fox, Megan Kelly, Sydney Walters



McAleese Report Chapter 19: Living and Working Conditions¹⁴

The McAleese Report: What is it?

Published in February 2013 and prepared by the Inter-Departmental Committee, the so-called “McAleese Report” established the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries. The Report, responding to UN Committee Against Torture pressures to investigate, found evidence of State complicity in the Magdalen Laundries and compiled a State narrative of the events. Despite seemingly incriminating the State, the Report misrepresents the women’s experiences and lacks thoroughness and accuracy in its investigations. Following the Report’s publication, the Irish State continues to assert that “[n]o factual evidence to support allegations of systematic torture or ill treatment of a criminal nature in these institutions was found” (5).¹⁵

On Physical Abuse:

“A large majority of the women...said that they had neither experienced nor seen other girls or women suffer physical abuse in the Magdalen Laundries” (932).

“None of the women told the Committee that their heads had been shaved...The exception occurred where one woman had her head shaved because she had lice” (944).

On Outside Communication and Lack of Freedom:

“The general pattern...seems to have been that visits were permitted, but that they were supervised” (949).

“Doors were locked, especially at night, as security measures, ensuring safety and preventing people from moving about the building. Designated sisters were on duty at night to ensure safety” (961).

On Medical Neglect or Lack Thereof:

“The Committee also made contact with a number of medical doctors who had attended the girls” (963).

In a length testimony, Dr. Michael Coughlan, who served the Galway Laundry from 1979 until 1984, claims that women were seen regularly and with due diligence. Dr. Coughlan held monthly clinics in the Laundry and reports that he “did not come across any complaints...or clinical signs which might alert one to maltreatment” (964). He found women to be “quite happy” (964).

Competing Voices: Galway Survivors Contradict McAleese Report

Where is this testimony from?

These testimonies were submitted to the McAleese Committee by the Justice for Magdalenes Group as part of its Principle Submission. The Report ignored 793 pages of survivor testimony. This is what some of that testimony contends:

On Physical Abuse:

Margaret Burke: “They were thumping you and calling you names and pulling your hair and putting their fists through you.”¹⁷

Margaret Burke: “Severe punishment...would come from the nun where she would cut your hair and belt you with a stick.”¹⁸

Maisie K: “They forced me on my knees and cut my hair.”¹⁹

Maisie K: “...dinner would be stopped or you’d get no supper if you did something during the working hours, if you gave cheek to the nun or the like.”²⁰

On Outside Communication and Isolation:

“Margaret Burke: “I never seen any letters...any contact with the outside world.”²¹

Margaret testifies that she never received visitors or mail and that all mail was censored by the nuns. She never enjoyed recreation outside and communication with the other women inside was strictly prohibited. Girls were prohibited from speaking and laughing with one another. They were denied simple expressions and stripped of their humanity. “You lived in silence.”²²

On Medical Neglect:

Margaret reports that she never saw a doctor during her stay and tells of the severe malnutrition that she and others endured. Eventually, the body became accustomed to the poor food.²³

Make Visible the Tree

by Patricia Burke Brogan²⁴

This is the Place of Betrayal.

Roll back the stones behind Madonna blue walls. Make visible the tree.

Above percussion of engines from gloom of catacombs, through a glaze of prayer, scumble of chanting, make visible the tree, its branches ragged with washed-out linens of bleached shroud.

In this shattered landscape, sharpened tongues of sulphur-yellow bulldozers slice through wombs of blood-soaked generations.

This is the place, where Veronica, forsaken, stares and stares at a blank towel.



Patricia Burke Brogan and Remembering the Women

In March 2009, a memorial commemorating the plight of the women confined in Galway’s Laundry was unveiled. Poet-playwright Patricia Burke Brogan has written extensively on the Laundries, particularly Galway’s, where she was a novitiate for a period. Her 1992 play, *Eclipsed*, is based on the Galway Laundry. “I believe that this wonderful luminous limestone sculpture will heal our city, that the pain held in the earth here in this place of betrayal will be appeased,” says Brogan.²⁵

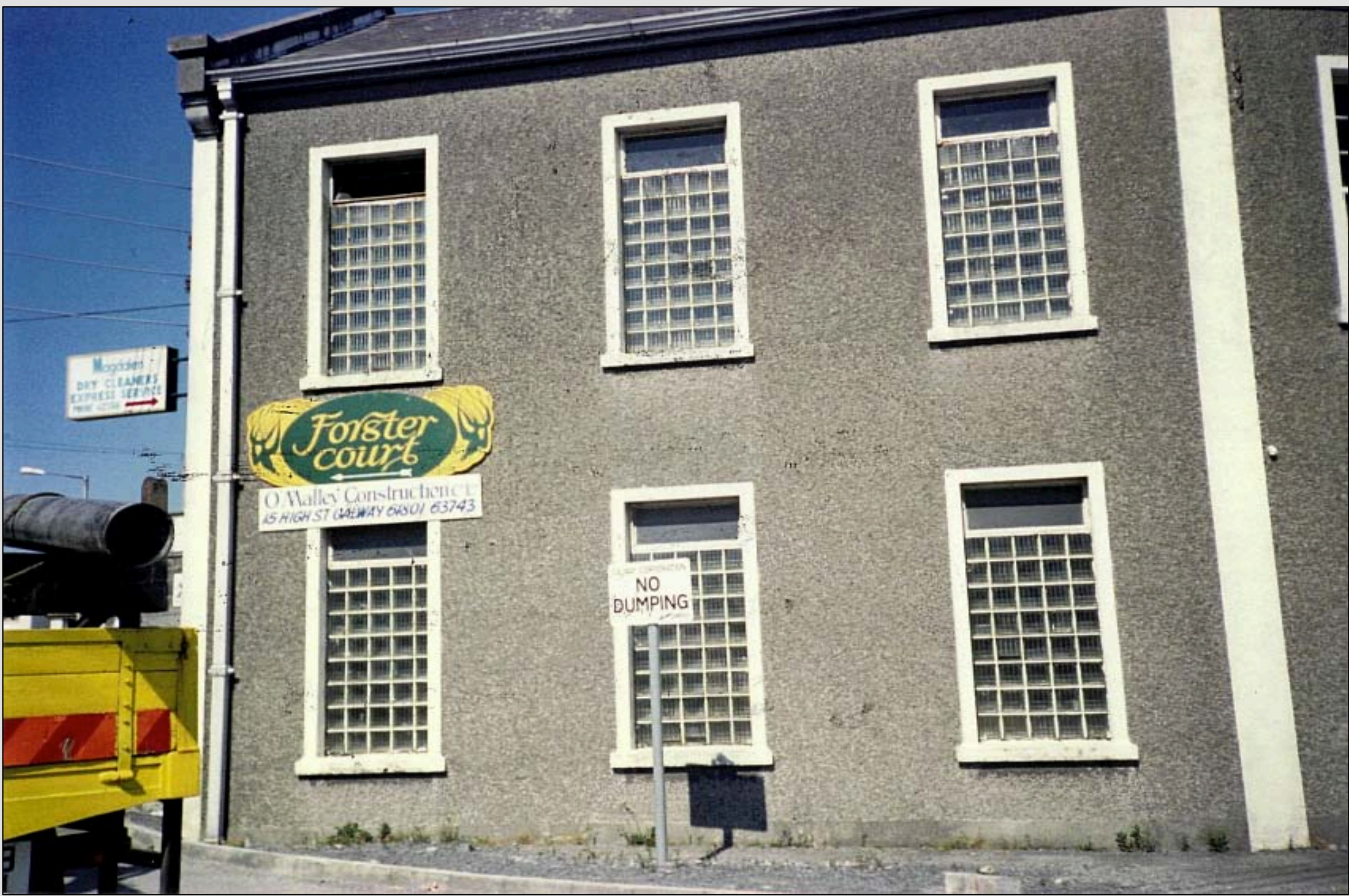
At the unveiling, Burke Brogan read her poem, “Make Visible the Tree,” which is inscribed on the memorial. To Brogan, this memorial makes the suffering of the women in the Galway Laundry visible—to know and acknowledge the suffering and injustice of the past is the beginning of healing and change. She demands visibility, attention, and accountability through the monument, the same attention she calls for in her literary work.

The McAleese Report paraphrases and minimizes Burke Brogan’s testimony by pointing to the fact that she spent only a week in the institution. It contends that her literary writings are “fictionalized accounts and were not to be considered a narrative of what she witnessed.” It recognizes, ultimately, that her disillusionment with the Laundries and passion for the subject are reflected in that work, but ultimately undermines her experience and her literary truth-telling.²⁶

One year after the statue was installed, Galway City council voted to remove it in order to widen a bus lane. Although the city ultimately left the statue in its original location, the fight over whether or not to move the memorial exposes the persistent tension surrounding the legacy of the women who lived in the Galway Laundry.²⁷

Why It Matters

The abuses survivors faced are undeniably shocking, particularly, the public ignorance and State minimization of the Laundry. The Irish State and the City of Galway have done little to apologize to these women and have instead opted to undermine their experiences and avoid any government culpability, going so far as to consider removing the Galway Laundry memorial. The women have been left to advocate for themselves in a society that is still largely dismissive of women. Margaret Burke, Maisie K., and Patricia Burke Brogan exemplify the fight for visibility. While the McAleese Report acknowledges some wrongdoings, survivors deserve deeper investigation and more validation of testimonies.



Street view of commercial Magdalen Laundry on Foster Street.²⁸

Open For Business: Public Advertisement

The Galway Magdalen Laundry paid for an advertisement congratulating the Connemara Gateway Motor Inn.² By describing itself as a “Laundry and Dry Cleaning Service,” the Sisters of Mercy announced their business enterprise and commercial focus, contradicting the McAleese Report’s assertions. Chapter 20 of the Report describes the financial viability of the Laundries and found that they “were operated on a subsistence or close to break-even basis rather than on a commercial or highly profitable basis.”³



The Report provides accounting records for only 24 years of operations, and no explanation is given for the missing data, only that the business “was a charitable undertaking.”⁴ “The Sisters of Mercy in Galway had a practice of submitting annual accounts to the local Ordinary, the Bishop of Galway” and accounts “appear to have been prepared by a firm of external accountants.”⁵ The Bishop’s involvement calls into question the nuns’ financial independence and autonomy. Moreover, the Committee relied on self-audited accounts from the nuns and did not require an independent audit. Confirming the laundry’s commercial work, the advertisement draws public attention to the business operations and directly negates the nuns’ and Report’s assertions.

PATIENT’S ESCAPE FROM MAGDALEN ASYLUM.
On Thursday morning a young woman inmate of the Magdalen Asylum, Galway, whose name was stated to be unknown, escaped from the institution. She is described as being aged about 25 years, wearing a black skirt, and had a slight stoppage in her speech.

In a 1928 *Connacht Tribune* article, the public is warned about a woman who has fled from the laundry, stigmatizing the woman and the “Asylum.”¹⁶



A large sign indicates the entrance to Magdalen Laundry.²⁹

Galway Magdalen Laundry Footnotes

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5. Ibid., 997.
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20. *Ibid.*, 19.

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22. Ibid., 17.
23. Ibid.
24. Brogan, Patricia Burke. "Make Visible the Tree." *Above the Waves' Calligraphy*. Salmon Publishing, 1994. pp. 31. Print.
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