

circle of supporters to dissociate himself when the cracks in the story appeared, and to admit his misgivings in his newspaper. Samuel B. Smith, editor of a rival nativist newspaper with the colorful title *The Downfall of Babylon*, also supported Maria Monk's story, despite the profits it was providing for his rival, Brownlee. In an effort to gather his share of the spoils, he first published his own tract: *Decisive confirmation of the Awful disclosures*. When that failed to sell well, he produced his own escaped nun, calling her Saint Francis Patrick and claiming that she, too, had escaped from the Hotel Dieu. Her story was published as *The escape of Sainte Francis Patrick, another nun of the Hotel Dieu*. Frances Partridge, the woman who portrayed Saint Francis Patrick, was a less convincing performer, and doubts were raised very quickly about her story. When a tearful reunion was arranged in which Maria Monk embraced Frances Partridge, Monk's own credibility gap widened.

The publication of defenses of the Hotel Dieu only added to the furor and sparked the publication of refutations of refutations. The Hotel Dieu and the Bishop of Montreal chose to remain above the fray and did not respond to the book. In attacking the Hotel Dieu, the nativists had chosen to attack one of the most respectable institutions in all of Canada. Picture a charity hospital run by the D.A.R. and you have some sense of the reputation of the place. The hospital was founded by Mlle. Jeanne Mance, a lay nurse, in 1642. She returned to France and convinced a group of nuns, members of the order of Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph, to come to Montreal to staff the hospital. In 1659, the convent was formed. Shortly before the publication of the *Awful Disclosures*, the nuns of the Hotel Dieu had distinguished themselves by their zeal in treating victims of a cholera epidemic. These women were venerated by the people of Montreal, Protestant and Catholic, and the whole community was outraged by the attack on them. Their champions published anonymously a refutation titled: *Awful exposure of the atrocious plot formed by certain individuals against the clergy and nuns of lower Canada, through the intervention of Maria Monk*. Well-reasoned and full of verifiable facts, the book was little read. It was denounced as a fabrication put out by the priests of Montreal.

A more serious threat was found in the various publications of William Leete Stone. Stone was a Protestant with vaguely nativist sympathies. While traveling in Canada in the fall of 1836, Stone obtained permission to explore the convent to search for the tunnels, prisons, and mass grave described by Maria Monk. He found no evidence to support her claims, and returned to the United States convinced that she was an impostor. Stone also met with Maria Monk and questioned her about

the convent he had just left. He was further convinced that she had never been in the Hotel Dieu. He published his findings in tracts and editorials, and though he was much attacked in return, his testimony reduced Maria Monk's following.

Maria Monk continued to lose credibility with the public. In 1837, she ran off to Philadelphia with an unidentified male companion. She later claimed that she had been abducted by a group of priests who took her to Philadelphia with the intention of eventually returning her to Montreal. She sought refuge in the home of a physician, William Willcocks Sleigh. Sleigh, at first, believed her story and contacted her guardian, Slocum, to come and retrieve her. In the course of subsequent interviews with Monk, he found her story increasingly changeable and incoherent. He became concerned for her welfare, believing that she needed protection from herself and her guardian. Sleigh wrote a pamphlet documenting his contact with Maria Monk and published it under the title *An exposure of Maria Monks pretended abduction and conveyance to the Catholic asylum, Philadelphia by six priests on the night of August 15, 1837: with numerous extraordinary incidents during her residence of six days in this city*. Its contents further discredited Maria Monk. Shortly thereafter, in an attempt to regain her status as heroic victim, Maria Monk wrote a sequel to the *Awful Disclosures*. *Further Disclosures by Maria Monk concerning the Hotel Dieu nunnery of Montreal* contained little additional information, and did little to improve her situation. By now, interest in Maria Monk the person had waned, and her *Awful Disclosures* had a life of its own which did not require her presence. The story had passed into popular mythology. When Monk gave birth to another illegitimate child in 1838, she did not even attempt to explain, and her remaining supporters drifted away. It is believed that she married, but her husband left her a short time later. In 1849, Maria Monk was arrested for picking the pocket of her companion of the moment. She died that same year at the age of thirty-three.

*The Boston Pilot*, a popular Catholic newspaper, ran the following brief obituary on September 8, 1839: "There is an end of Maria Monk; she died in the almshouse, Blackwell's Island, New York, on Tuesday."

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Pamphlet 314

## **“The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk”**

by Ruth Hughes

*The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal* was first published in January 1836. Its coming was much anticipated, having been announced some months prior in the nativist newspaper, the *American Protestant Vindicator*. The book was written by a former nun who had escaped from the Hotel Dieu nunnery in Montreal. It promised to expose the iniquity of the Catholic convent system. The book was as sensational as it promised to be, and immediately became a rallying point for the nativist movement. According to the *Protestant Vindicator*, by the end of July, 1836 it had already sold over 26,000 copies. By the start of the Civil War, it would have sold 300,000 copies. It was reprinted, under varying titles by various publishing houses, at least half a dozen times just in 1836, and continued to be reprinted well into the twentieth century. A second work, *Further Disclosures of Maria Monk*, sold well also, and was reprinted several times, along with various other works refuting or supporting her claims. Quite an industry was born out of Maria Monk's story.

Maria Monk's story, as she tells it, is a pathetic one. Though raised a Protestant, young Maria became interested in religious life through her experience as a student in a convent school. Upon completing her studies, she chose to become a nun, and elected to become a novice at the nearby Hotel Dieu. Once Maria had been admitted, the Superior wasted no time in dispelling her misapprehensions about the nature of conventual life. Maria Monk describes the convent as little more than a harem for the use of the local priesthood. She characterizes the scene in the following terms:

The Superior now informed me that having taken the black veil, it only remained that I should swear the three oaths customary on becoming a nun; and that some explanation would be necessary from her. I was now, she told me, to have access to every part of the edifice, even the cellar, where two of the sisters were imprisoned for causes that she did not mention. I must be informed that one of my great duties was to obey the priests in all things; and this I soon learnt, to my utter astonishment and horror, was to live in the practice of criminal intercourse with them. I expressed some of the feelings which this announcement excited in me, which came upon me like a flash of

lightning; but the only effect was to set her arguing with me, in favour of the crime, representing it as a virtue acceptable to God, and honourable to me. The priests, she said, were not situated like other men, being forbidden to marry; while they lived secluded, laborious, and self-denying lives for our salvation. They might be considered our saviours, as without their service we could not obtain pardon of sin, and must go to hell. Now it was our solemn duty, on withdrawing from the world, to consecrate our lives to religion, to practice every species of self-denial. We could not be too humble, nor mortify our feelings too far; this was to be done by opposing them and acting contrary to them; and what she proposed was, therefore, pleasing in the sight of God. I now felt how foolish I had been to place myself in the power of such persons as were around me.

As the story progresses, we find the building is riddled with secret entrances, underground tunnels, prisons, and even a mass grave for the babies born of their liaisons. Although Maria's feminine delicacy prevents her from being too specific about the abuses she suffers, the reader eventually finds poor Maria pregnant and seeking her escape in order to save the life of her child. She finds her opportunity and manages to make her way to New York where she tells her story to a minister in a charity hospital after barely surviving the delivery of her baby daughter. The minister convinces Maria that the world must know the truth, and the *Awful Disclosures* are unveiled.

The first thing you have to understand about the *Awful Disclosures* is that they are not true. The second thing you have to understand is that Maria Monk had very little to do with writing it. Her story is a pathetic one, just not the one she would have you believe. Maria Monk was born to a Protestant family in St. Johns, Quebec in 1816 or 1817. In an affidavit written after the scandal of the *Awful Disclosures* broke, Maria Monk's mother described her as an uncontrollable child, a fact she attributed to a brain injury suffered when Maria was little more than a toddler: a slate pencil was rammed into her ear, penetrating her skull. From that time on, according to her mother's testimony, Maria was uncontrollable and subject to wild fantasies. Her only known contact with a Catholic institution was as an inmate of the Magdalene asylum in Montreal. When it was discovered that she had become pregnant while resident in the asylum, she was asked to remove herself from that institution. It was then, aged eighteen and pregnant, that she met William K. Hoyte, head of the Canadian Benevolent Society, an organization that combined Protestant missionary work with ardent anti-Catholic activism. Hoyte took Monk as his mistress, and together they traveled to New York. At this late date, we will never know how much of the story originated with Monk's disordered imagination

and how much of it was created by the opportunistic Hoyte. Hoyte called upon his fellow nativists, Rev. J. J. Slocum, Rev. George Bourne, Theodore Dwight, and others; collectively they wrote the *Awful Disclosures*. Maria Monk is believed to have contributed details of the city of Montreal and of the practices she observed in the Magdalene asylum. This much is known because shortly after the publication of the *Awful Disclosures*, the cabal began to fight amongst themselves over the profits, and several suits and counter-suits were initiated in the New York courts: Slocum was the principal author, Hoyte and Bourne were major contributors, and the others mostly just offered suggestions. Slocum and Maria Monk banded together in suing the others and their publishing house, Harper and Brothers. Maria Monk then left Hoyte to become the companion of Slocum. Monk was still underage, and Slocum was appointed her guardian.

The first edition of the *Awful Disclosures* carries the imprint of Howe and Bates. If you look to find other titles put out by that publishing house, you won't find much. Howe and Bates were employees of Harper and Brothers. Harper was worried that their Catholic customers would desert them if they published Maria Monk's book, but they could not deny themselves what looked to be a lucrative enterprise. They created the dummy publishing house of Howe and Bates to insulate themselves from any fallout. Interestingly, the only other work I have found with the imprint of Howe and Bates is a refutation of Monk's claims.

Works of anti-Catholic literature, fiction and purported non-fiction, were widely available in the first half of the nineteenth century. When Maria Monk's book was published, it met an audience that was predisposed to accept the fantastic story she presented. America already had a long history of anti-Catholic sentiment and government policy. English colonists, especially New England's puritans, brought with them an antipathy toward Roman Catholicism. Many of the colonies, and later states, had, at one time or another, proscriptions against Catholics holding office, special taxes on Catholic servants, laws against priests owning property, and the like. The increasing number of Catholics immigrating to this country increased concerns about "Papal despotism," and rumors abounded including American equivalents of the gunpowder plot. Denunciations of the Catholic Church and its supposed political aspirations were regularly the subject of sermons. European, and especially English, works of anti-Catholic literature were widely read and soon supplemented with native productions. Titles generally available in the early 19th century include: *Master-key to popery*; *Mysteries of popery unveiled*; *Priestcraft exposed*; *Danger in the dark: a tale of intrigue and priestcraft*; *The female Jesuit, or a spy in the family*; and (my personal

favorite): *Jesuit juggling: Forty popish frauds detected and disclosed*. Although anti-Catholicism had not yet resolved itself into a political movement, it had established itself as a social movement with organizations and newspapers throughout the country, and especially concentrated in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore.

Maria Monk's book was by no means the first of its kind. A year earlier, Rebecca Theresa Reed published a work entitled *Six Months in a Convent*, which claimed to expose the horrors of life in the Ursuline convent in Charlestown. In August 1834, that convent was burned down by an angry mob, convinced that women were held there against their will. A few months later, Reed's book was published. Although widely circulated and often reprinted, this book never achieved a high degree of popularity. Reed was too well known in the area as an unreliable, uneducated serving-girl. She had been hired to work at the convent, then fired; she had never been accepted as a potential member of the order. What's more, her ignorance made her an unconvincing story-teller. Another work was more influential, though admittedly a work of fiction: Mrs. Sherwood's *The Nun*. The first American edition of this English novel was published in 1834 in Princeton. Her sentimental and sensationalized portrayal of the life of a nun had helped to fuel the fury of that Charlestown mob, and probably served as the inspiration for portions of Maria Monk's own story. But Maria Monk's book outsold even the venerable Mrs. Sherwood.

What was it about the *Awful Disclosures* that made it so popular? The *Awful Disclosures* draws on every popular fear and misunderstanding of Catholicism prevalent at the time. Written in the style of a gothic novel, it features sex and violence without lapsing into pornography. The *Awful Disclosures* even includes a mentally unbalanced nun as a source of comic relief. She fills the same role as Annette, Emily's flighty maid in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

It didn't hurt that it was a Canadian convent that was the object of attack. When the Ursuline convent was burned, mainstream Protestants reacted by distancing themselves from the nativist movement. But no one expected a crowd of ruffians to march on Canada. It was safer to vilify a distant nunnery. Distance also made it more difficult to prove or disprove the allegations made in the book.

The book was well-supported in the nativist community in New York. Rev. W. C. Brownlee, editor of the *American Protestant Vindicator*, was an early Monk supporter. To his credit, he was one of the first of the inner