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They Walled Up Nuns, Didn't They?

*H. Rider Haggard's Montezuma's Daughter
and Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England*

BY THE LAST DECADE of the nineteenth century, the figure of the Roman Catholic nun had clearly emerged as an important and often misrepresented figure in Victorian fiction. This literature did not deal with nuns, especially those who were Roman Catholic, in a favorable light. But even the Anglican sisterhoods did not escape hostile criticism.¹ In addition to the numerous campaigns throughout the nineteenth century to bring all convents under state control and inspection, some English authors tried to alert their countrymen to the dangers of all sisterhoods by illustrating the evils traditionally associated with Roman Catholic conventual life; for example, loss of traditional English freedoms, sexual abuse at the hands of wicked priests and monks, and the baleful influence of celibacy on Victorian family values. Some writers cautioned Anglican parents about sending their daughters abroad to receive an education at convent schools under the supervision of Catholic nuns. Emma Leslie's *Caught in the Toils* is an outstanding example of this fear. In this novel, horrified fathers and mothers read about the alleged Roman Catholic dislike of the Bible, cruel punishments that the students endured and the attempts of the nuns to convert impressionable young school girls to their religion. Another allegation, more horrific and

1. A revival of sisterhoods had taken place in the Anglican Church during the nineteenth century. Peter Anson estimated that over sixty sisterhoods had been founded during that time. See Anson, *Call of the Cloister*.

inhumane, also blackened the history of conventual life during the nineteenth century, namely, that during the Middle Ages and the Inquisition rebellious or sinful nuns were frequently put to death for their transgressions by immuring them within the walls of convents, where they would die a hideous death. Roman Catholics naturally tried to discredit these hateful assertions. When Henry Rider Haggard, the popular Victorian novelist, mentioned in *Montezuma's Daughter* that he had personally seen the remains of an immured or walled-up nun and her child in a Mexico City museum, he started a brief but vigorous controversy with defenders of Roman Catholicism.

The Reformation era saw an outpouring of works that critiqued the monastic life and pointed out a series of abuses that justified the dissolution of religious houses during the reign of Henry VIII. But the criticisms of the inhumane conditions of monasteries and convents continued after England declared her independence from Rome. Incarceration or confinement within the cloister became a recognized abuse. In 1776, Edward Gibbon published the first volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and had some harsh words to say about the cruel practices of religious houses, including imprisonment. After enumerating the usual catalogue of abuses and strange acts of Roman Catholic mortification, Gibbon talked about the punishment of recalcitrant monks at the hands of “capricious” superiors: “the slightest offences were corrected by disgrace or confinement, extraordinary fasts, or bloody flagellation.”² Other authors, however, focused their attacks against convents and emphasized the cruel abuses allegedly committed against the sisters. The story of the imprisoned or walled-up nun entered English literary life in the late eighteenth century.

Matthew “Monk” Lewis introduced the evils of a Spanish convent to the English public in 1796 with the publication of *The Monk*. In addition to the sins of the profligate monk, Ambrosio, Lewis described for the reader numerous evils of convent life, including murder, torture, and the imprisonment of Sr. Agnes, a nun who had become pregnant. In a vivid and emotional scene, the superior of the convent explained the punishment this nun must endure:

Listen then to the sentence of St Clare. Beneath these Vaults there exist Prisons, intended to receive such criminals as yourself . . . Artfully is their entrance concealed, and She who enters

2. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 596.

them, must resign all hopes of liberty, . . . Food shall be supplied to you, but not sufficient for the indulgence of appetite . . . Chained down in one of these secret dungeons, shut out from the world and light for ever . . . thus must you groan away the remainder of your days.³

After the death of her child in the dungeon, Sr. Agnes was eventually rescued. Lewis talked about a nun who was placed in confinement to live out her days separated from the other nuns. Nineteenth-century England was acquainted with other stories of alleged imprisonment within convent walls that were not taken from the pages of fiction.

A well-publicized incident from Europe, namely, the incarceration in Cracow of a Carmelite nun, Sr. Barbara Ubryk, and several stories of confinement and imprisonment in nunneries on English soil, and a number of examples of so-called “escaped nuns” eventually added fuel to the belief that heartless superiors occasionally imprisoned disobedient nuns.⁴ But none of these nineteenth century stories of confinement suggested that the victims were literally walled up or immured. Immurement meant loss of freedom and personal liberty, not a punishment or penalty where nuns were placed within the walls of a convent and left to suffer a horrible death. But another interpretation of immurement also became popular during this time. A number of writers and scholars told their readers that throughout the past sinful and unchaste nuns had suffered death by immurement. These individuals never hinted that this wicked practice had continued into the modern era, but nonetheless the image of the walled-up or entombed nun became a powerful image in Victorian anti-Catholicism.

The Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century glorified things medieval, and in a way contributed to the revival of the monastic life for both men and women. One of its leading and most popular writers, Sir Walter Scott, published *Marmion* in 1868, a poem dealing with convent life, and some remarks he made in footnotes helped to perpetuate the myth of the nuns who were sentenced to death by immurement in the

3. Lewis, *Monk*, 408.

4. Numerous publications and hostile preachers accused Roman Catholic convents of stripping nuns of their freedom and liberty. In some instances, the superior did restrain the recalcitrant nun within the convent. If a nun happened to run away from her convent, critics painted this incident as an escape from a situation similar to a prison. In the case of Sr. Barbara, the superior claimed that she was restrained because she was mentally ill. See Smith, *Calumnies against Convents*.

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walls of a convent. Commenting on “penitential vaults,” Scott noted that these vaults “were the *Geissel-gewolbe* [sic] of German convents.”⁵ Later in the poem, Scott described a frightening scene: “And now that blind old Abbot rose, To speak the Chapter’s doom, On those the wall was to enclose, Alive within the tomb.”⁶ And the author made a startling accusation in a footnote to explain these words. “It is well known,” Scott pointed out, “that the religious, who broke their vows of chastity, were subjected to the same penalty as the Roman vestals in a similar case.”⁷ He described how a small niche was carved out in the wall of a convent to receive the sinful nun. She received some food and water, and then her grave, marked with the words *vade in pace*,⁸ was sealed. Convent officials, according to this footnote, did not resort to this punishment frequently “in latter times,” but then Scott made a startling statement that some anti-Catholic writers would later repeat: “among the ruins of the abbey of Coldingham were some years ago discovered the remains of a female skeleton, which, from the shape of the niche and the position of the figure, seemed to be that of an immured nun.”⁹ The legend that the Roman Catholic Church killed disobedient or profligate religious by the punishment of immurement existed outside the world of fiction. In 1851, for example, John Henry Newman gave a series of lectures to the members of the Oratory in Birmingham dealing with the status of Catholicism in England and touched briefly on the myth of ecclesiastical imprisonment. Newman reminded his audience that some people still believed that convents and monasteries, including the Oratory, maintained cells where murders and immurings took place.¹⁰

Rumors of the imprisonment and immuring of helpless Roman Catholic nuns titillated and delighted some opponents of Roman Catholicism, but were these stories of torture and death credible? Some dismissed the allegations as examples of pure fantasy and vile religious

5. Scott, *Marmion*, 84.

6. *Ibid.*, 2.25.1–4.

7. *Ibid.*, 91.

8. Scott accepted the following translations for *vade in pace*: “part in peace,” or “go into peace.”

9. Scott, *Marmion*, 91. Coldingham was an Anglo-Saxon “double monastery,” which included both monks and nuns, located in the northern part of the Kingdom of Bernicia. See Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, and Eckstein, *Women under Monasticism*.

10. Newman, “Fable,” 121–22.

prejudice. On the other hand, some trusted the verdict of Sir Walter Scott. Those who believed that the Catholic Church literally walled up monks and nuns to silence and murder them turned to recent studies of the Inquisition for ammunition. Published in 1871, William Rule's *History of the Inquisition* painted a picture of Fra Tommaso Fabiano di Mileto, who was immured in 1564: "So within four walls built up around him, but with sufficient space to kneel down before a crucifix and an image of the Virgin, this poor man was to be confined . . ." ¹¹ Rule also quoted the testimony of an individual who had seen the bones of people immured in the walls of the Inquisition in Seville.

In 1891, H. Grattan Guinness, evangelical preacher, supporter of foreign missions, and Secretary of the Protestant Alliance, published a poem, "The City of the Seven Hills" complete with illustrations. In the appendix, he stated that during "my recent visit to Mexico, *I saw myself the remains of the victims who had been walled up alive by the Inquisition.*" ¹² Guinness quoted a significant passage from Rule's book on the subject, but the most dramatic section was inclusion of two photographs of the skeletal remains of victims who had allegedly been walled up by the Inquisition. Other evidence also came from Mexico. William Butler published *Mexico in Transition* in 1892. This book described the discoveries of bodies that the Inquisition authorities apparently sealed within the convent walls. From the evidence, Butler re-enacted the process of immurement: "He or she (for women were among the number) was placed in the cell, a "brother" of the order who was handy with the trowel was ready to build up the entrance before their face and leave them to a horrible death, while a coat of plaster and whitewash made all invisible, and these fiends in human form may have supposed that they had sealed up their crimes forever and buried their secret beyond discovery." ¹³ Butler's book also contained photographs of some of these victims and he announced that two bodies had been placed in a museum in Mexico City. Moreover, he noted that "a number of human skeletons

11. Rule, *History of the Inquisition*, 2:197.

12. Guinness, *City of the Seven Hills*, 300. The photographs of the victims appear on the following two pages. Chapter 3 of that book, "Rome's Convents," critiqued the alleged abuses of religious life.

13. Butler, *Mexico in Transition*, 294. See also an address that Butler, a "foe of priestcraft," gave in 1888, published as *Roman Catholicism and the Reformation in Mexico*. In the section titled "Secrets of the Prison House," he described the process of immurement carried out by the Inquisition and the discovery of the skeletons in Mexico.

packed together in rows” had also been unearthed.¹⁴ These accounts of the Inquisition’s use of immurement as a punishment certainly supplied some solid evidence for the hatred and suspicion of Roman Catholicism that existed in England; they also provided the historical background for a work of fiction by a popular author.

By the 1890s, H. Rider Haggard (1856–1925) could draw on many elements to construct a novel dealing with life in sixteenth-century Spain and Mexico: a tradition of anti-Catholicism that stressed abuses in convents, including the incarceration of rebellious or sinful nuns; the well-publicized case of Sr. Barbara, the imprisoned nun of Cracow; stories of nuns who had “escaped” from English convents; recent books dealing with the Inquisition that documented incidents of immuring; and finally, the photographs and testimony of witnesses who saw the remains of victims at a Mexico museum. Haggard’s fame and reputation as a writer of fiction were due chiefly to *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She: A History of Adventure* (1887), both set in Africa.¹⁵ Mexico, however, provided the setting for *Montezuma’s Daughter*. This romance appeared first in serial form in a London paper, *The Graphic*, during 1893 before it was published as a book in the same year by Longmans, Green and Company. *Montezuma’s Daughter* might not have attracted much attention were it not for chapter 10, “The Passing of Isabella de Siguenza,” and an explanatory footnote that appeared in the July 29th edition of *The Graphic*. This section of the story described the immuring of a young nun, previously named Isabella, and her illegitimate baby in the presence of monks and nuns. The condemned had broken her religious vows and thus deserved to die for her sins. The author painted the scene of her death in a vivid and chilling manner.

After boasting that England had not engaged in such inhuman punishment as practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, Haggard described the tomb that would soon receive Isabella and her baby. Near the workmen “were squares of dressed stone ranged neatly against the end of the vault, and before them [mother and child] was a niche cut in the thickness of the wall itself, shaped like a large coffin set upon its smaller

14. *Ibid.*, 296.

15. For a biography of H. Rider Haggard, see entries in: *Dictionary of Literary Biography. British Short-Fiction Writers, 1880–1914: The Romantic Tradition*; and *The Dictionary of National Biography*.

end.”¹⁶ The narrator keenly drew attention to the other coffin-niches already placed within the wall. Eventually the pair were entombed. Haggard’s personal comment about the immuring of nuns, which many believed came from the imagination of the novelist, guaranteed that this emotional tale of torture and murder in a convent would not be forgotten soon. After the Dominican priest read the sentence of death by immuring, the reader was directed to a footnote where Haggard stated:

Lest such cruelty should seem impossible and unprecedented, the writer may mention that in the museum of the city of Mexico he has seen the desiccated body of a young woman which was found immured in the walls of a religious building. With it is the body of an infant. Although the exact cause of her execution remains a matter of conjecture, there can be no doubt as to the manner of her death, for, in addition to other evidences the marks of the rope with which her limbs were bound in life are still distinctly visible. Such in those days were the mercies of religion.

The fame of Rider Haggard and the publication of the story in a book ignited a controversy which would be fought in pamphlets and in the columns of a London paper. Some Roman Catholics, not surprisingly, viewed Haggard’s remarks as a slanderous attack against their religion.

Fr Herbert Thurston, SJ (1856–1939) was no stranger to controversy.¹⁷ His books, pamphlets, and articles frequently defended the integrity of Roman Catholicism against prejudiced attacks. In 1892, one year before Haggard’s hostile comments about nuns appeared in print, Thurston wrote an article, “Walled-up Alive,” for the Jesuit publication, *The Month*. The Catholic Truth Society reprinted the article, with some additional material, in the same year. Fr Thurston’s work not only surveyed the recent anti-convent literature, but set the tone or the course that discussion of Haggard’s work would take. The Revd W. L. Holland’s anti-Catholic lecture, “Convents Romish and Anglican,” during which he showed a slide of a skeleton of an immured nun, forced Thurston to take up his pen.¹⁸ He began by recognizing the Protestant stereotype that

16. *The Graphic* (London), 29 July 1893.

17. See Crehan, *Father Thurston*. The bibliography shows the extent of this cleric’s writings. In addition to Thurston’s articles and pamphlets combating prejudice against convents, see also, Thurston, *No Popery*.

18. Holland’s lecture was published under the same title by the Church Association and the National Protestant League. In 1895, Holland wrote a book on the subject of walled-up or immured nuns: *Walled Up Nuns and Nuns Walled In*. The twenty illustra-

convents were prisons, and then announced his purpose: "This is what I have tried to do in the pages which follow, with the result that in not one of the alleged instances is there even a fair presumption, much less conclusive proof, that any religious was walled up or starved to death."¹⁹ Thurston admitted that the church had been guilty of "many terrible things" committed in the name of religion in the past, but an appeal to the testimony of people who claimed they saw alleged evidence of immurement in distant countries, such as Mexico, should not be accepted as solid proof.

Thurston began by attacking W. H. Rule's *History of the Inquisition*, and argued that Rule's evidence did not necessarily prove that the Inquisition had actually walled up heretics. Rule had misinterpreted the historical facts. They might have been "confined within four walls" as any other prisoner for punishment. Fr Thurston also dismissed Sir Walter Scott's testimony in *Marmion*. The words *in pace*, he argued, "in no instance have the slightest reference to walling-up alive in the sense of Sir Walter Scott."²⁰ So-called "prison cells" did exist to restrain "refractory religious," but, Thurston continued, "These cells were in no sense niches in the wall such as Sir Walter Scott has in mind, neither were they walled up, but they were closed with doors like other cells, barred no doubt from the outside by those in charge of the prisoner." Thurston also attacked the findings of the American, H. C. Lea, regarding the torture and punishment associated with the Inquisition. The Jesuit acknowledged Lea's scholarly credentials, but he again repeated his belief that prisoners were not literally walled up and left to die. The authorities incarcerated them, but they were supplied with food. Fr Thurston did not minimize the existence of medieval punishment, but also pointed out that the recent growth of an anti-Catholic tradition had distorted the evidence.

After dismissing the main arguments of these authorities, Fr Thurston returned to Sir Walter Scott. His reputation and popularity counted more than the scholarship of the others, and Scott's reference to the famous nunnery at Coldingham struck closer to home than unknown convents in Spain and Mexico. Thurston mentioned several au-

tions of victims served as an additional condemnation of convent life.

19. Thurston, "Walled-up Alive," 174. The Catholic Truth Society published this article, with some additions, in the same year (1892). See "The Immuring of Nuns."

20. *Ibid.*, 178.

thorities that discussed the history of Coldingham, and noted that these and other reputable accounts made no mention of an immured nun discovered in the convent's ruins. Other sources, which Thurston calls "guide books," did make reference to the remains of an immured skeleton found at the nunnery. But he quickly dismissed these antiquarians; historical or archaeological evidence could not support the charges of a nun put to death by immurement at this Anglo-Saxon convent. After discrediting other apparent instances of immurement, for example the legends concerning the burial cell at the Temple Church, Fr Thurston concluded his article by returning to the Revd W. L. Holland's lecture. In it, Holland had made reference to H. Grattan Guinness's eyewitness accounts of seeing the remains of walled-up nuns on a recent trip to Mexico. Thurston, however, told his readers that in southern climates the Capuchins customarily buried their dead "still clothed in the habit . . . fixed upright in a sort of niche, where it is carefully bricked up."²¹ Guinness, he argued, probably saw a cemetery similar to where the Capuchins interred their deceased members. Even if an over-zealous religious superior had immured a nun, an isolated even should not discredit the entire Catholic Church. Finally, Thurston expressed surprise at the lack of cases or examples of immured nuns or monks. If it were such a common practice, why the silence? Where was the evidence?

It is not known if H. Rider Haggard had read Fr Thurston's article before the offensive part of *Montezuma's Daughter* appeared in the July 28th edition of *The Graphic*. The response to his short footnote probably shocked him. On August 4th, James Britten, the Honorary Secretary of the Catholic Truth Society, wrote to the editor of *The Graphic* and complained of Haggard's "extremely offensive and untrue assertions with regard to the immuring of nuns and the general management of convents."²² Britten also expressed regret and disappointment that "a paper which receives considerable support from Catholics should publish so misleading an account of Catholic life and practice." The editor forwarded the complaint to Haggard, who responded to Britten's concerns.

H. Rider Haggard replied and stated that he did not want to engage in a religious controversy, but the tone of Britten's letter demanded an answer. He acknowledged that he was a Protestant, but he had no inten-

21. Ibid., 193.

22. Britten to Editor of *The Graphic*, 4 August 1893; printed in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 January 1894.

tion “to give pain to yourself or to any member of the Roman Catholic faith.”²³ In fact, Haggard admitted that he had “the greatest veneration for that faith . . .” The author expressed surprise, however, that an incident in a story set in the sixteenth century could “possibly have given offence to the members of a serious society.” He did not intend the immurement scene to be interpreted as a commentary on contemporary Catholicism, but he did believe that nuns who had broken their vows of chastity in the Middle Ages often suffered the penalty of death by immurement. Haggard then repeated his contention, which he had stated earlier in the offensive footnote, that he had seen the skeleton of a young woman and a baby who had been immured alive. He reminded James Britten of Sir Walter Scott’s poem and suggested that Britten personally investigate the human remains found recently at an old religious house at Waltham Cross, Essex. Haggard concluded his reply by deploring the past horrors committed in the name of religion, but could not understand Britten’s objections namely, the “offensive and untrue” assertion of the immurement of nuns. Moreover, he noted, historical scholarship provided “sufficient evidence to justify the use of a similar incident in a romance.”

Britten responded immediately to Haggard’s letter. He assured the novelist that ‘I did not imagine that you had any intention of attacking Catholics.’²⁴ Four days later, he sent Haggard a copy of Fr Thurston’s *Immuring of Nuns*, published by The Catholic Truth Society, which refuted Sir Walter Scott and others who believed that nuns in the past had been walled up to punish them by death. But Haggard, as he admitted earlier in the correspondence, did not want to become involved in a debate about religion, and chose not to respond to these letters from Britten. After a third communication asking for a reply the author finally acknowledged Britten’s correspondence and told him that he believed cases of immuring of nuns “were rarer than is supposed.”²⁵

Fr Herbert Thurston jumped into the fray and published an article in *The Month* titled, “Mr Rider Haggard and the Immuring of Nuns.”²⁶ Thurston began by immediately assaulting Haggard: “Seeing that the writer commands a large public, and that it is his pleasant conceit to pose as a man of erudition and a serious student of history his attack may

23. Haggard to Britten, *The Graphic*, 9 August 1893; *ibid.*

24. Britten to Haggard, 9 August 1893; *ibid.*

25. Quoted in Britten to Haggard, 6 September 1893; *ibid.*

26. Thurston, “Mr Rider Haggard and the Immuring of Nuns.”

be considered of sufficient importance to our returning to the subject.”²⁷ Prejudice died hard, he argued, and Catholics should not take abuse or calumny passively, especially when a popular newspaper such as *The Graphic* spread the offensive rumors. Thurston again strayed from the path of an objective spokesman for Catholicism and attacked Haggard’s literary skills in general, and pointed out that his works, although widely read, had decreased in popularity. He finally discussed the offending scene of immurement in *Montezuma’s Daughter* and the offensive footnote. Fr Thurston acknowledged that cells were constructed to house refractory monks and nuns, but no evidence existed to support the walling up or the immurement of religious men and women as a death penalty. Thurston then turned his attention to Haggard’s inflammatory contention that he had seen the remains of a woman and her infant while in Mexico City.

Thurston simply stated that Haggard lacked any evidence or proof for his words. In fact, he even questioned if the novelist’s “memory or imagination is not playing him tricks.”²⁸ Fr Thurston suggested that the bodies that Haggard saw might be members of an ancient institution similar to the Roman Vestal Virgins who sentenced their members who violated their vows of chastity to death by immuring them. Even if a wicked or evil superior did punish a nun for sins against chastity, Thurston argued, no reason could justify the murder of the innocent baby! Therefore, according to this logic, this alleged case of immurement never took place. Moreover, the Inquisition could not carry out a death sentence; the secular authorities put the victim to death. Fr Thurston believed that the discovery of human remains in Mexico could not be trustworthy evidence. Consequently, “nothing short, in fact, of the testimony of eyewitnesses can justify us in accepting any cases of immuring.”²⁹ No solid or reliable evidence, however, supported the alleged cases of immurement in Europe, at Coldingham, or at Waltham Cross. In fact, it appeared that Haggard had consulted an article on monasticism written by R. F. Littledale for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which was critical of the religious life and contained historical inaccuracies.³⁰ “But great is the

27. *Ibid.*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

29. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

30. See Littledale, “Monachism.” In addition to Thurston’s charges of inaccuracies, the author did exhibit a generally hostile and critical view of monasticism. Littledale even drew attention to Sir Walter Scott’s belief in the existence of a skeleton of an

power of the imagination, especially the trained imagination of an historical novelist.”³¹ Fr Thurston ended his article with another personal attack on Haggard. “Enough has been said,” he pointed out, “to show the utter worthlessness of the evidence on which it has been sought to justify a gross and offensive libel.”³² Thurston even quoted an unlikely ally, Oscar Wilde, who had earlier described Haggard and his literary style in *The Decay of Lying*: “who really has, or had once, the makings of a perfectly magnificent liar, he is now so afraid of being suspected of genius that when he does tell us anything marvellous, he feels bound to invent a personal reminiscence, and to put it into a footnote as a land of cowardly corporation.”³³

H. Rider Haggard responded quickly to Fr Thurston’s attack. He wrote to the editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette* and enclosed a copy of the correspondence which had taken place between himself and James Britten during the previous August, which the newspaper printed along with Haggard’s response to Thurston. Thus began a heated exchange of letters in the columns of this paper. Haggard also acknowledged that he had read Thurston’s recent article, and he accepted “the onslaught” of the Jesuit and The Catholic Truth Society with “Christian resignation.”³⁴ The author then talked about the contents of his footnote and stated that he could not provide the proof that his critics demanded. However, Haggard maintained, Thurston “should learn to discriminate between the fibre of a romance and positive allegations such as I have made in this footnote.” After repeating his recollection of his visit to the Mexico City museum, Haggard sarcastically replied to the remark that his memory had deceived or played tricks on him and stated that he had also seen the remains of another immured woman. He did admit that he “may have been misinformed as to the origin of these relics; but here I may add that in no country does religious discipline seem to have been more rigorous in past generations than in Mexico.” Haggard reminded his readers that the Inquisition did commit horrible deeds and put people to death.

Haggard then talked about the skeletal remains he saw in a dungeon near Waltham Cross. Thurston, in his mind, had failed to disprove alle-

immured nun at the Coldingham nunnery.

31. Thurston, “Mr Rider Haggard and the Immuring of Nuns,” 28.

32. *Ibid.*, 29.

33. Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, 973.

34. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 March 1894.

gations of immurement there. Again, Haggard conceded he might have been given false information. Workmen had supposedly discovered the remains, “but it may be that the tale is false, and no such skeletons were found.” Consequently, he called upon “the local antiquaries” to investigate the story and even challenged Thurston to

visit the house in question. Haggard chose to write to *The Pall Mall Gazette* not to answer his critics’ “discourtesies” or to respond to Fr Thurston’s article, but rather

to ask some of the many antiquaries, whom you must number among your readers, to favour those who are interested in the matter with their views as to the alleged walling up of nuns who had broken their vows of chastity, and with arguments deduced from the available facts less impassioned and one-sided than those that emanate from the Catholic Truth Society.

Did immurement of sinful nuns take place in the past? Haggard admitted that his interest in the matter, “formerly impersonal and artistic, has grown quick under the lash of the Rev. Herbert Thurston’s wrath . . .” and he eagerly awaited the verdict of experts. Moreover, he believed the reaction of some Roman Catholics to a romance which took place three centuries ago was “nothing short of ridiculous.” “It is fortunately impossible to imagine any society representative of the Anglican branch of the Christian Church,” Haggard concluded, “opening its heavy guns upon a novelist who wrote in an adverse spirit, say, of the persecution of the Jesuits in the eighteenth century, or the plundering of the religious houses by Henry VIII.”

People took up this challenge and began to send their opinions to *The Pall Mall Gazette*. A Roman Catholic layman, not an antiquary or expert in history or archeology, responded first. Haggard, who had no solid evidence for his assertion that unchaste nuns suffered death by immurement in Mexico, at Waltham Cross, or at Coldingham, upset English Roman Catholics, this correspondent maintained, because a number of his countrymen still continued to identify nineteenth-century Catholicism with the practices of the Inquisition.³⁵ The writer noted that some people believed that a skeleton of a woman could be found beneath the Middle Temple Hall, but did this suggest that “the benchers of that honourable society made a practice of immuring their

35. *Ibid.*, 18 January 1894.

wives who proved faithless, or barristers who violated the rules of professional etiquette”? On the following day, another author defended Haggard by pointing out that examples of immurement could be found in works dealing with the Inquisition, especially H. C. Lea’s *History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*.³⁶ A Roman Catholic writer hesitated to condemn Haggard by suggesting that he did not consciously intend to deceive or malign Catholics. “We do not accuse you of falsehood, but we think you might correct the errors pointed out to you, and not be so positive as to points on which you may have been misled.”³⁷ Even a Frenchman entered the debate and presented evidence to show that immuring under certain conditions, that is a voluntary, devotional practice by which a person withdrew from the world or a judicial sentence handed down by a secular court, had existed in medieval France.³⁸ But this letter failed to address charges that the Church had condemned immoral nuns to death by immurement.

The controversy began to heat up when James Britten and Fr Thurston joined in the correspondence. In *The Pall Mall Gazette* of 20 January 1894, James Britten, the Honorary Secretary of the Catholic Truth Society, protested vehemently against the publication of his earlier correspondence with H. Rider Haggard. He also pointed out that Thurston did not belong to the Catholic Truth Society, and again repeated his main objection to Haggard’s footnote, which “Catholics regard as an offensive calumny.”³⁹ Britten emphasized Haggard’s faulty evidence and lack of proof in regard to Sir Walter Scott’s poem, alleged European examples of immurement, the remains associated with Waltham Cross, and the absence of solid documentation to substantiate his experiences in Mexico City.

Herbert Thurston wrote to the paper two days later, and began by apologizing for his remark about Haggard’s “imagination or his memory . . . playing him tricks.”⁴⁰ He also restated his main criticism of the

36. *Ibid.*, 19 January 1894.

37. *Ibid.*, 20 January 1894.

38. *Ibid.*, 22 January 1894. In respect to the judicial sentence, the author gave the example of a woman convicted of killing her husband. “The Parliament [*sic*] of Paris sentenced her to be “imprisoned and immured for ever in the cemetery of the Holy Innocents in a little house which, at her own expense, and with the first money derived from her estate, shall be built *against the church, as was the ancient custom*.”

39. *Ibid.*, 20 January 1894.

40. *Ibid.*, 22 January 1894.

novelist's scene where the nun was sent to her death by immurement. "This he represents not merely as an isolated instance of cruelty, but as a common practice in the sixteenth century sanctioned by the highest ecclesiastical authority." Moreover, Haggard still had not produced any proof to back up his claims of immurement. "But where is the evidence even for a single instance of the sort?"

H. Grattan Guinness quickly answered the challenge of these two Roman Catholic writers and their cries for evidence, and stated that he had seen "these remains in the city of Mexico."⁴¹ Moreover, Guinness had observed the remains of an additional victim he examined in another Mexican city. For proof, he directed the skeptical reader to consult his book, *The City of the Seven Hills*, which contained photographs of walled-up victims.

For the next week, people could read letters that either defended or supported H. Rider Haggard and the belief that the Inquisition had sentenced erring nuns to death by immurement. The latter group quoted passages from history books, such as Rule's study on the Inquisition and Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which described the horrors and tortures of the Inquisition, or from travelers who had recently seen the remains of immured nuns. With few exceptions, these writers repeated the opinions contained in the earlier letters on the subject, namely, that the walling up of nuns did happen. One writer noted that the public could view the mummies of immured victims on exhibition in America.⁴² Another correspondent deviated from the subject somewhat and argued that tales of incarcerated nuns who had escaped from their convents had recently become a familiar item in anti-Catholic rhetoric in England and should also be treated as a fanciful myth. In addition to the constant refrain that no solid evidence of immurement could be found, one writer did offer a believable explanation for the skeletons or mummies found in Mexico. "Until quite recently (namely, till about 1870) every one who died in Mexico was buried or walled up in a masonry tomb."⁴³ Because of the wet soil of the area surrounding Mexico City, bodies were placed within walls. Surprisingly, no critic of H. Rider Haggard addressed the photographic evidence offered by H. Grattan Guinness.

41. *Ibid.*, 23 January 1894.

42. *Ibid.*, 23.

43. *Ibid.*, 29 January 1894.

This debate came to a climax in the last two days of January with letters by Fr Thurston and Haggard. Again, Thurston simply dismissed those who supported Haggard; they relied on false or fabricated evidence for their belief in the immurement of nuns. Even some scholars, such as Henry Charles Lea who condemned the Inquisition and its use of torture, never accused the “Inquisition, or the religious orders, of putting offenders to death by walling them up in niches.”⁴⁴ Details in W. H. Rule’s *History of the Inquisition*, a main source for the belief in walled-up nuns, were “inconsistent and demonstrably inaccurate.” But Fr Thurston offered no new information or defense of his position. In the same edition, *The Pall Mall Gazette* announced that correspondence on the subject of the immuring of nuns would end on the following day. The paper, it appears, recognized that the debate had run its course and nothing original could be added to the discussion. In fact, the arguments had become repetitive and redundant. It was fitting that Haggard, who sparked the controversy with a footnote in a novel, should also have the final word.

Haggard’s long letter began with a defense of his integrity against accusations made by Fr Herbert Thurston: the novelist did not tell “a most deliberate and flagrant falsehood . . .”⁴⁵ Haggard promised to return to this charge of dishonesty later, but then turned his attention to the question of immurement. He admitted: “I was in error when I stated in my letter to Mr Britten on August 9th that I believed the evidence of history to prove that nuns who had broken their vows had been immured in the wails of convents.”

This opinion I arrived at too hastily after consulting such authorities as I had at hand; but further research, and communications that I have received from gentlemen learned in ecclesiastical history, show me that whether or not the taking of “the life of a nun for a grave moral transgression might be conceivably be defended as an act of judicial authority,” as Father Thurston suggests in his article, there is no proof that so barbarous a punishment was ever enforced, at any rate in this country.

Haggard, however, refused to absolve the Catholic Church and the Inquisition for their involvement in torture, inhumane activities and death. “The immurement in ‘Montezuma’s Daughter,’” he pointed out,

44. *Ibid.*, 30 January 1894.

45. *Ibid.*, 31 January 1894.

“is supposed to have occurred in Spain, where, as I presume, the most ardent defenders of the Inquisition will admit, cruelties as great or greater, were in those days commonly practiced in the name of religion.”

More serious in Haggard's mind than this error or interpretation of fact was “Father Thurston's insinuation against my veracity.” Did the skeletal remains at Waltham Cross spring from the imagination of a novelist? Did any evidence exist? In his defense, Haggard stated that two correspondents had written to him and confirmed his descriptions of these bodies. But Thurston's hostile words about the footnote in *Montezuma's Daughter* posed more difficult problems for Haggard, and he reproduced the footnote for the readers of *The Pall Mall Gazette* to examine. Fr Thurston's constant demands for proof and the need for other witnesses to corroborate what he saw in Mexico City irked the author. Haggard drew the attention of the public to H. Grattan Guinness's book and photographs and the personal testimony of the Revd William Butler and his pictures, which W. H. Rule reproduced in woodcut for his book on the Inquisition. The imagination of a novelist, he stated, certainly did not create these horrible images. “The remains are to be seen in the museum of Mexico and unless Dr Guinness, Dr Rule, and Dr Butler have entered into a conspiracy to deceive their readers it appears certain that they were found immured in the ‘walls of a religious building,’ namely, in one of the palaces of the Inquisition.” Haggard might have admitted his mistake in respect to immurement in nunneries, but he still believed that the victims had been walled up as a death penalty in the walls of an Inquisition building. The skeletons did not come from a common cemetery as Fr Thurston argued. On the other hand, Haggard did not want to offend or insult Roman Catholics. “But had I known that it would prove a stumbling-block and a cause of offence to certain members of the Roman Catholic faith,” Haggard pointed out, “I should have been inclined to leave it out, since I have no wish to give pain to them, or indeed to the followers of any creed, and I only send you this further evidence for publication in order to vindicate myself against the attacks and insinuations of Fr Thurston.”

The announcement by *The Pall Mall Gazette* that the editor had decided to terminate the discussion of the topic of *Montezuma's Daughter* and the alleged immurement of nuns did not stop all discussion by the main participants. Haggard, who had admitted his mistake and had apologized to Roman Catholics for any hurt, tried to end the controver-

sy by including a retraction in later editions of this novel. Beginning in the 1895 edition, Haggard first reprinted the original and questionable footnote and then acknowledged that the “statements herein contained have been made the subject of much public dispute.”⁴⁶ “Those who question their accuracy allege, amongst other things, that the bodies spoken of were taken from graves and exhibited in the museum at Mexico, not as a testimony to the terrors of the Inquisition, but to exemplify the preservative effects of soil and climate upon the human tissues. The Author therefore withdraws the note, and expresses regret that, in all good faith, he should have set down as fact that which has been proved to be a matter of controversy.” In spite of the animosity he held against Fr Thurston, Haggard did not address the issue again. Thurston, however, could not remain quiet.

Thurston did not graciously accept Haggard’s retraction and expression of regret. In an article written for *The Month* shortly after Haggard’s final letter to the newspaper, Thurston noted that the author of *Montezuma’s Daughter* “has found himself obliged by their [historians and antiquaries] representations to withdraw from an untenable position.”⁴⁷ The Jesuit certainly savored the victory: “Of course the retreat is effected in accordance with the immemorial custom of strategists, under cover of a good deal of smoke and amid the noise of a seemingly vigorous cannonade, but the evacuation is none the less complete.” His sarcasm rose to the surface when he belittled Haggard’s sources, which he believed were flawed. According to Thurston, it surprised him that H. Rider Haggard, “a very superior person,” should pin “his faith to the lucubrations of the Reverend Doctors Rule, Butler, and Guinness, and joining hands in one of their ‘blameless dances’ over the prostrate form of the Roman Inquisition.”⁴⁸ If people did not believe him, Fr Thurston challenged his critics to search the records of the Inquisition which had been preserved in libraries in the British Isles, in Latin America, and on the Continent. Fr Thurston’s last word on *Montezuma’s Daughter* also appeared in the Jesuit publication, *The Month*. This short article contained an English translation of a Mexican newspaper which printed the correspondence of two Mexicans. One, the Librarian of the National Museum in Mexico City, commented on

46. Haggard, “Prefatory Notes,” in *Montezuma’s Daughter*.

47. Thurston, “Another Mexican Mare’s-Nest,” 323.

48. *Ibid.*, 324.

the “mummies” in the museum. They were not the remains of nuns, and moreover, the Inquisition and religious superiors never used immurement as a punishment. They constructed prisons for that purpose.⁴⁹ Fr Thurston believed that he had successfully trumped H. Rider Haggard.

Eventually the emotions over the question of immured nuns subsided. After the public retraction, the ghost of Haggard’s now celebrated scene of convent death and torture lingered on for a few years in the minds of some anti-Catholics,⁵⁰ but it never achieved the notoriety and acrimony which characterized the response it drew from Roman Catholic writers, especially Fr Herbert Thurston and James Britten. No rational person believed that convents had in recent years put sinful or disobedient members to death by cementing them up in walls. Immurement or the act of walling up, for the foe of convents and Catholicism, meant the loss of traditional English freedoms, and thus nunneries should come under state control or inspection. Roman Catholics viewed H. Rider Haggard’s scene of immurement and his personal testimony as an insult, and they demanded an apology. His supporters argued that Roman Catholics had indeed killed people by immurement. Consequently, the Catholic Church, and not the novelist, should express regret for its sins of the past. The debate started by *Montezuma’s Daughter* testifies to the extent of religious prejudice that existed beneath the surface of Victorian society. Even an innocuous comment in a romantic novel could stir up ancient religious feuds or suspicions.

49. Thurston, “Note to the Article on ‘Mr Rider Haggard and the Immuring of Nuns.’”

50. Fr. Herbert Thurston continued to write against the belief in the immurement or walling up of sinful nuns, and The Catholic Truth Society published two of his later pamphlets. The first, “The Myth of the Walled-up Nun” (1902), contained the same material, with some minor additions, as his January 1894 article in *The Month*. “A Tale of Mexican Horrors” (1904) devoted the first few pages to the debate surrounding *Montezuma’s Daughter*. The rest of the pamphlet discussed other allegations of torture and immurement in Mexico. In 1895, W. Lancelot Holland wrote *Walled Up Nuns and Nuns Walled In*. This book reprinted large sections of Haggard’s description of the immurement scene in *Montezuma’s Daughter* and also printed some of the correspondence that appeared in *The Pall Mall Gazette*. Holland’s book contains the photographs of the alleged victims of clerical immurement that Haggard and others were referred to in the recent debate. The author also included some historical background and evidence dealing with Sir Walter Scott’s poem and other stories dealing with immurement. The myth of Maria Monk occupies a prominent place in this anti-Catholic book. Holland probably did not believe that nuns were literally immured in late nineteenth-century convents. However, “. . . in our CLOISTERED Convents more especially, refractory Nuns are to-day undergoing severities to both body and mind, even more awful, because more lasting, than being actually WALLED UP ALIVE.”

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