The Popery Panic
David S. Reynolds

In the early 1830s, the Hôtel-Dieu nunnery in Montreal was reportedly the site of illicit sex and mass murder. Lecherous priests from a nearby seminary snuck in through a secret tunnel and forced themselves on nuns. Scores of babies were born, baptized, strangled, and cast into a cellar. Lime was spread over the tiny corpses to speed their decomposition.

These stories appeared in Awful Disclosures, by Maria Monk, of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal (1836), which became an instant bestseller. In its purported author, the “escaped nun” Maria Monk, claimed that the horrors she had witnessed in the nunnery had compelled her to flee. She wrote that she was so distraught by her experiences there that she twice attempted suicide. After escaping from the nunneries, she made her way to New York, where Protestant ministers helped her publish her narrative.

The book was a shamb, perpetrated by minister friends of Monk’s. Its ghostwriter was most likely the Reverend George Bourne, who ran a nativist newspaper and had previously written a similarly salacious anti-Catholic exposé. Investigations of the nunneries yielded no evidence of the kind of behavior Monk had recounted. The respected Colonel William L. Stone, an influential New York journalist and publisher, approved it with Awful Disclosures in hand and concluded that she was never a nun but rather “an arant imposteur”; her book was “a tissue of calumnies,” and “the Priests and Nuns [were] innocent in this matter.” Monk’s mother testified that she had suffered brain damage as a child when she ran a pencil into her head and had drifted into prostitution as an adult. Monk had been living in a Montreal asylum for “fallen” women during the seven years she supposedly was at the nunnery. Exposed as a fraud, she sank into obscurity and poverty.

In 1849, at thirty-two, she was living in an almshouse in New York when she was arrested for theft. She was incarcerated in a penitentiary shortly thereafter.

The revelation that Awful Disclosures was a hoax concocted by Protestant ministers fears of Catholicism did not prevent the book from selling more than 300,000 copies before the Civil War and remaining in print to this day. It attained, as one historian writes, “the unquestionable distinction of being the ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin of Know-Nothingism’”—a prominent anti-Catholic nativist movement.

As the “Patriot” sarcastically notes in her lively book Escaped Nuns, Awful Disclosures was a typical example of the anti-Catholic literature that captured the popular imagination during the antebellum period, when over twenty best-selling convent tales appeared. Among them were The Escaped Nun, The Female Jesuit, Priests’ Prisons for Women, The Captive Nun, The Haunted Convent, The Convent’s Doom, and Celia; or, The White Nun of the Wilderness. Such books, Yacovazzi points out, often featured women held as sexual prisoners by lustful priests in nunneries that had labyrinthine passages, trap doors, and rooms used as torture chambers. Those behind the publication of anti-Catholic books before the Civil War were, in the main, Protestant ministers who wanted to consider the stories of escaped nuns in comparison to other forms of popular writing, such as lurid “city mysteries” novels and anti-Mormon writings. She analyzes numerous unfamiliar works including anti-Mormon novels like The Mormoness; or, The Trials of Mary Maverick, The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled, Wife No. 19; or, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Expose of Mormonism, and the inevitable Awful Disclosures of Mormonism. Sexual bondage, infanticide, and the miseries of plural marriage were common topics in them. One novel, Mormon Wives, sold more than 40,000 copies in the 1850s. By 1900, over fifty anti-Mormon books were in print.

All such works, Yacovazzi argues, revealed the hazards that middle-class women faced when they abandoned the role then assigned to them—that of the pure, pious wife and mother. In her view, the era’s sensational writings served as advice manuals on avoiding tempters, such as lascivious Catholic priests, seductive urban routs, and magnetic Mormon men.

It is fortunate that Yacovazzi does not lean too heavily on this thesis, for the scandalous material the stories comes closer to offering escapist thrills than instruction for women. For those who needed training in motherhood and domesticity, there were plenty of religious tracts, sentimental novels, and doxology guides. The literature Yacovazzi discusses operated most powerfully as titillating exposes of alleged religious and social corruption. City ministers and novelists wrote and published novels, written by authors like George Lippard and George Thompson, portrayed ruling-class figures—George Lippard and George Thompson, portrayed ruling-class figures—as hypocrites and immoral men.

Anti-Mormon novels emphasized the alleged depravity of Joseph Smith’s followers, who engaged in what most Americans saw as the unthinnable practice of polygamy.

Anti-Catholic works in particular reached bizarre extremes. For example, Samuel B. Smith’s Rosamond Calvertson described Catholic priests in Cuba who kidnapped young African men for the purpose of killing them and making sausages out of them—a story parodied in John T. Roddan’s John O’Brien (1851), in which Protestant boys are cast into a meat grinder, producing “half a mile of sausages...reserved for the eating of priests and nuns.”

Some of the most suggestive passages in Yacovazzi’s book also contain the salacious background of anti-Catholic literature.

She writes of the novels Elizabeth Harrison and Rebecca Reed, who fled the Ursuline convent on Mount Benedit in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in such a distraught state that rumors spread locally of sexual deviance and torture there. Aroused to a frenzy, a Protestant mob burned the convent to the ground, desecrated the surrounding property, and exhumied corpses from a Catholic cemetery, hurling them into the river, and pulling teeth from skulls to keep as souvenirs. Reed capitalized on her experience by writing Six Months in a Convent (1835), whose stories of severe penances, women held captive, and plots to extend the power of the pope wildly exaggerated the demanding regimen and harsh treatment she had endured at Mount Benedit.

The incident generated a parade of escaped-nun narratives, Norwood Damon’s The Chronicles of Mount Bene dict (1834) among them. The Charlestown convent became the scene of revol, torture, and child murder until a group of Protestants, appalled by the smell of roasting human flesh, attacked and destroyed it. Damon explained that American readers ignored works of “plain common sense and truth....but give them some awful, nasty disclo­ sures, by Maria Monk, or some other whorish, wild, improbable, bugbear story, and they will gulp it all down voraciously, and lick their lips with in­ effable delight.”

Yacovazzi mentions the rise of the Know Nothing Party (aka the American Party) but doesn’t provide much detail about nativist politics. The American Party, which warned that the pope was trying to take over America and destroy its institutions, called for banning Catholics from public office, deporting immigrants and criminals, and requiring a twenty-one-year naturalization period for immigrants. By 1854, the party had around one million members nationally and elected several governors and hundreds of state legislators and the mayors of Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, as well as inciting political riots that killed over seventy people and wounded several hundred. In light of the remarkable political success of nativism in the 1850s, it would be interesting to know more about its connections with the seaborne literature Yacovazzi discusses. Nevertheless Escaped Nuns merits praise for the breadth of its coverage of this literature and for Yacovazzi’s suggestions of just how intense cultural fears can become.

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Religious leaders swayed by evangelical Protestantism included Robert Matthes (aka Matthias), who was inspired by a religious revival and soon gained a cult following when he proclaimed himself God the Father; Jacob Cohran, who announced that he could raise the dead, heal the sick, and cast out devils; Jemima Wilkinson, whose followers considered her the Messiah; and Jacob Osgood, who said God had told him to warn sinners to flee the wrath to come. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, had reportedly caught a religious "spark" at a Methodist camp meeting in the "Burned-over District" of upstate New York; he claimed that, later, under the guidance of an angel, he discovered golden plates that he translated into the Book of Mormon. Among the sects that sprang up were many varieties of Baptists, including Primitive Baptists, Free-Will Baptists, Hard- and Soft-Shell Baptists, Particular Baptists, Six-Principle Baptists, Anti-Mission Baptists, Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarians, Baptist German-Seventh-Day, Close-Communion, General, Sabbatarian, and Foot-Washing Baptists—all with different emphases in doctrine.

America became, in the words of the novelist Catharine Sedgwick, "a country... where old faiths are every year dissolving, and new ones every year forming." Foreign visitors commented on the phenomenon: Alexis de Tocqueville noted the nation's "infinite variety of ceaselessly changing Christian sects," and the British tourist Frances Bessot observed that "the sects that sprang up were many varieties of Baptists, including Primitive Baptists, Free-Will Baptists, Hard- and Soft-Shell Baptists, Particular Baptists, Six-Principle Baptists, Anti-Mission Baptists, Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarians, Baptist German-Seventh-Day, Close-Communion, General, Sabbatarian, and Foot-Washing Baptists—all with different emphases in doctrine.


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