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The Man Who Counted All Prostitutes in New York City: John R. McDowall and the Scandal of the Magdalen Report

Alexander Moudrov

- 1 The Rev. John R. McDowall's ill-fated crusade against prostitution in New York City in the 1830s should have been a success. The young minister had a solid résumé of a dedicated activist and the genuine desire to help the city at the time when New Yorkers started to realize that prostitution was an increasingly alarming issue. Before moving to New York, McDowall studied theology at Princeton, where he often supplemented his classes with fieldwork by preaching to alcoholics, atheists, deists and other unsavory characters in hopes of turning them to God. Afterwards, he was dispatched to Rhode Island, where he tirelessly travelled throughout the state on behalf of the Providence Tract Society. There he proved to be such an earnest preacher that Arthur Tappan, a prominent reformer and abolitionist, encouraged McDowall to move to New York. And so in 1830, the young man formally left Princeton and moved to the city to combat vice with unrivaled enthusiasm.
- 2 His journalistic and literary efforts, which are the focus of this article, were an integral part of that campaign and, as we will see, the main reason for its downfall. For the next few years after he moved to New York, McDowall devoted all his time not only to ministering to prostitutes in the slums and organizing rescue societies but also to writing about the extent of urban vice to bring the subject of prostitution to the attention of the reluctant public. In some respects, his interest in New York's underworld anticipated the rise of the urban gothic novel, which emphasized negative stereotypes about European and American cities. He started his crusade against prostitution by co-authoring the First Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the New York Magdalen Society (1830), a fourteen-page publication better known as the Magdalen Report. It was followed with *Magdalen Facts* (1832), an eclectic collection of

materials about McDowall's work in the notoriously dangerous area known as Five Points. In 1833 he started *McDowall's Journal*, which was designed "to expose public immorality, to elicit public sentiment, and to devise and carry into the effect the means of preventing licentiousness" (*McDowall's Journal* 1). He also contributed articles to *The Liberator*, *The New York Spectator*, and *The Observer and Telegraph*, which were reprinted in many other papers throughout the country to make him a nationally recognizable figure.

- 3 McDowall's interest in such a scandalous issue as prostitution should not have alarmed the general public. His literary methods, after all, reflected the conventions of the enduring American tradition of didactic sensationalism, which dates back to the early colonial period. McDowall's seventeenth-century predecessors eagerly exploited scandalous topics, particularly crime and sexual impropriety, in their sermons to warn people against backsliding. To recall Williams Bradford's words, colonial magistrates routinely turned to scandalous crimes and other "things fearful to name" in order to make such crimes "marveled at" as cautionary tales of human depravity (385-386). Even when many American Protestants moved away from the rigid Calvinism of early colonists two centuries later, the didactic tradition of sensationalism remained fairly popular among American religious writers and even influenced conventions of secular crime literature.¹ As a part of this tradition, McDowall insisted that all manifestations of crime were interconnected and needed to be methodically exposed either from pulpit or in didactic publications. He wholeheartedly believed that cautionary tales about crime, particularly about prostitution, advanced Christian principles in his country.
- 4 What is remarkable, however, is that McDowall's fate was different from that of many other ministers who in the past exploited scandalous issues in print with impunity. Almost from the start of his campaign, he was accused of impropriety, bad taste, and even licentiousness. He was ridiculed in press for his interest in fallen women and was ironically accused of promoting prostitution rather than combatting it. In 1834 the third Presbytery of New York, which had the authority to revoke his preaching license, actually ordered him to cease his journalistic activity and, when he failed to comply with that order, defrocked him on the charges of inappropriate conduct. Less than two years later, still a young man, he died exhausted by the controversy he created. What we have to ask, therefore, is why McDowall's approach, which was not much different from the one adopted by clergymen in early America, met so much resistance in the city known for its relative tolerance.
- 5 Previous studies of McDowall's crusade tended to emphasize McDowall's unorthodox religious views and methods as the main cause of his troubles. Larry Whiteaker's *Seduction, Prostitution, and Moral Reform in New York, 1830-1860*, the most extensive study of McDowall's work, explains that the reformer's turbulent experiences reflected changes in American Protestantism in the early nineteenth century. Whiteaker's argument echoed John W. Kuykendall's earlier essay "Martyr to the Seventh Commandment," in which Kuykendall surveyed McDowall's provocative literary efforts but ultimately explained the hostility McDowall encountered by pointing out his disagreements with religious and civic leaders, who found his methods unconventional. As Kuykendall also reminded us, McDowall's ultimate renunciation of Presbyterianism further cemented his status as a religious maverick. David S. Reynold's *Beneath the American Renaissance* and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual*

Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America briefly acknowledged the controversial nature of McDowall's publications, but they analyzed them only in their immediate social and literary context.

- 6 This essay explains McDowall's downfall as a reformer by not only analyzing his provocative works but also explaining how changing literary trends in the early nineteenth century shaped the scandal caused by his efforts. My analysis of McDowall's doomed career relies on the argument that the attacks that effectively ended his crusade reflected the crisis of the American tradition of didactic sensationalism, the conventions of which could no longer escape public scrutiny. If before the nineteenth century religious figures in America had a virtual monopoly on writing about scandalous topics, writers and journalists in the early republic moved away from didactic conventions and started to exploit controversial subjects for new literary purposes. One particularly notable sign of this trend was Americans' growing fascination with scandals involving powerful figures and the clergy, which increased in frequency in the early nineteenth century. Readers of all ranks did not only eagerly devour news about corrupt clergy but also become suspicious of clergymen and reformers in general.
- 7 I will therefore frame McDowall's downfall in symbolic terms and describe him as a victim of changing literary conventions. He was heavily indebted to the neo-Puritan brand of didactic sensationalism, the conventions of which became suspect in the beginning of the nineteenth century. While he was not a Calvinist in the same sense as early European colonists, he wrote in the tradition of the American jeremiad reminiscent of the seventeenth-century sermons of Samuel Danforth, Benjamin Colman, and Increase Mather. His task was to make his countrymen realize the extent of their profound depravity and, hopefully, awaken their appreciation for traditional religious values. Following the tenets of didactic sensationalism, McDowall insisted that provocative exposure of crime, with emphasis on shocking details, was essential for New Yorkers' effort to combat prostitution and other transgressions. As his first biographer wrote, McDowall's "pen must be constantly dipped in the muddy abominations of all that is loathing, and his paper blotted with blackened details of charnel-houses of the dead" (*Memoir and Select Remains* 377). So strong was McDowall's fondness for the shocking that his fellow reformer Lewis Tappan politely reproached him that he was "more gifted in searching out and exposing iniquities than in suggesting remedies" (Tappan 114). Even when he preached to destitute people, his goal was to make his listeners aware of their sinfulness through fear.
- 8 Once, when he was making rounds in Five Points, he was invited into a house where he found a dead poor man surrounded by his family and acquaintances. Instead of comforting them, he delivered an impromptu hellfire sermon in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards. "Think of Hell," he thundered:

Think of your midnight reveling 'midst cursing, bitterness, fighting, drunkenness, theft, and murder—of your terrific dreams, and the shrieks of the lost echoing in your ears, in the lone hours of night—of your own criminal conduct, and resolution to commit suicide and murder.... You already anticipate... taste of agonies of the pit. Look! Here on this table lies a man; it is his body; his soul is now rejoicing in heaven, or is tormented in hell. In him behold your future situation. (McDowall, *Magdalen Facts* 25)
- 9 He proudly recalled this sermon in one of his first books, which also reminds us that the episode was not isolated but actually reflected McDowall's preaching routine. He

was, like early American jeremiad preachers, eager to frame virtually any seemingly negative occurrence as an example of what he perceived as the nation's cultural downfall. "The chastity of the nation is violated," he proclaimed on another occasion while discussing the proliferation of prostitution, "the manners, the fashions, the habits, of society are full of seduction—and licentiousness daringly and unabashedly stalks abroad in its nakedness. Our profligacy, as a people, runs parallel with our oppression. We steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and then impiously declare that we are delivered to do all these abominations" ("Prostitution" 1). Students of Puritan homiletics might accuse McDowall of inadvertent plagiarism, because we can easily find similar language in scores of early American sermons.

- 10 New Yorkers, like all Americans, were quite familiar with repetitive and abstract preaching about "our profligacy" but seemed to be unprepared for McDowall's eagerness to tackle prostitution by examining its extent and causes in detail. The Magdalen Report, which he co-authored, was a bombshell designed to strip naked the entire New York sex industry and to drag all crimes into the open on the scale McDowall's contemporaries were apparently not inclined to tolerate. The report started with a doubtful but shocking claim that "the number of females in this city who abandon themselves to prostitution is not less than [sic.] TEN THOUSAND," or more than 20% of women of child-bearing age in the city. It went on to allege that the trade, like a disease, spread into every part of New York, with hundreds of seedy establishments hiding in such legitimate ventures as "boarding houses, dressmakers, milliners, stores and shops of various kinds." It added that prostitution knew no boundaries and victimized "girls and women of all ages and colors, married and single" (New York Magdalen Society 5).²
- 11 The committee's speculation about the causes of prostitution was particularly irksome to the report's readers, because it hinted at the fundamentally unjust nature of American society. The document put much emphasis on the economic factors, particularly poverty, as a cause of the problem. To put it simply, "very many cases of prostitution were the result of sheer necessity," with many young prostitutes described as "daughters of poor parents, and especially widowed mothers, whose necessities compelled them to seek employment as domestics" (New York Magdalen Society 2). In yet another provocative twist, the Magdalen Report also suggested that perhaps Americans' appreciation for domestic virtue prevented the so-called fallen women from redeeming themselves, even in cases in which those women were clearly victimized by opportunistic men. As the report claimed, there were many "daughters of the wealthy, respectable and pious citizens of our own and other states, seduced from their homes by the villains who infest the community, preying upon female innocence, and succeeding in their diabolical purpose" (New York Magdalen Society 6).
- 12 One of the most controversial points in the report was that the blame for the prostitution should be shared by both prostitutes and their customers. Its authors did not hesitate to blame men of all ranks for seducing women and patronizing prostitutes, and threatened to reveal "the *names* of scores of the men and boys who are the seducers of the innocent" (New York Magdalen Society 5). At the same time they also blamed prostitutes for seducing young men:
bad women multiply the seduction of heedless youth, more rapidly than bad men seduce modest women. A few of these courtesans suffice to corrupt whole cities, and there can be no doubt that some insinuating prostitutes have initiated more

young men into these destructive ways, than the most abandoned rakes have debauched virgins during their whole lives. (5)

- 13 This explains why the report likened prostitution (or prostitutes, to be exact) to an epidemic, “the pest and nuisance of society” (New York Magdalen Society 7).³
- 14 In the aftermath of the report, McDowall continued his crusade against prostitution with other publications and defended his work with the strategy that worked for many ministers in the past. As he wrote in the inaugural issue of *McDowall’s Journal*, which he created to raise awareness about various city ills, “The evils must be shown to the public to interest them to remove the evils” (*McDowall’s Journal* 1). He was dismayed by what he believed was his contemporaries’ reluctance to address provocative issues for fear of offending parishioners’ sense of decency. He complained that ministers generally discouraged discussions of anything that could be deemed provocative and obscene. As he put it, “A fastidious taste excludes from the pulpit sermon even a strong remark on the sin of debauchery.” As a result, churches “ceased to teach men that licentiousness is sin,” which, he alleged, contributed to proliferation of prostitution (McDowall, *Magdalen Facts* 26). Young women, who were never apparently warned about the dangers of vice, grew to become hapless victims of seducers. Young men, for their part, easily succumbed to sinful practices without fully understanding the repercussions of their actions. In McDowall’s view, many sex crimes could be prevented if churches simply made better efforts to expose vice without fear of offending the public.⁴
- 15 McDowall’s religious orthodoxy was also apparent in that he was eager to denounce bad foreign influence that, he was convinced, undermined traditional American values. He was, for example, absolutely intolerant of “liberal” religions and what he called “the relics of French infidels” (McDowall, *Magdalen Facts* 29). He called deists “Satan’s confessed imps” (22). He described Thomas Paine as a heretic whose works were to be banned in colleges in order to keep students “pure and undefiled” (23). McDowall also had little good to say about contemporary journalism, those “infidel and licentious daily and weekly papers” (28). He complained about the proliferation of obscene pamphlets, which he claimed could be found on virtually every corner. He railed against foreign books about “seducers, and debauchees, and rakes, and assignations, and seductions, and illicit amours,” which in his view promoted licentiousness (27). Theaters, he went on echoing the Puritans and contemporary moralists, were even worse. They nourished corrupt sensuality that transformed every man into a seducer and every woman into an unwitting victim.
- 16 What was ironic, of course, was that McDowall’s provocative denunciation of licentiousness was thrown right back at him. The Magdalen Report caused what one contemporary described as “clamor and indignation” that rolled through the entire country (“Prostitution” 55). Following the appearance of The Magdalen Report, the city was buzzing with speculations about the veracity of its claims and the integrity of its authors. Very few New Yorkers wanted to believe McDowall’s assertions. It was not long before opportunistic satirists turned the hapless minister into an object of consternation and ridicule. Within just a few months, there appeared several mocking tributes to McDowall and his fellow reformers, including *Orthodox Bubbles* (1831), Peter Pendergrass’ play *Magdalen Report: A Farce* (1831), and *The Phantasmagoria of New-York, A Poetical Burlesque upon a Certain Pamphlet, Written by a Committee of Notorious Fanatics, Entitled The Magdalen Report* (1831), not to mention countless newspaper articles that

turned McDowall's campaign into a widely publicized scandal that lasted till his untimely death.

- 17 The common refrain in attacks on McDowall was that his work did not combat lasciviousness but actually encouraged it. One of the first mocking reviews of the *Magdalen Report* to appear was *Orthodox Bubbles*. The pamphlet was printed in Boston for those who were not familiar with the original report. It did not even try to sound like an objective review, greeting readers with a telling image of several reformers enjoying company of prostitutes (Fig. 1). McDowall can be identified as the man on the left with a religious tract in his pocket and a young woman on his lap. The dialogue that follows reveals that McDowall actually tells the woman to "repent and be pious" while fondling her. The overall message of *Orthodox Bubbles* is that such reformers are corrupt and their report, contrary to its ostensible purpose, encouraged young men to patronize prostitutes. It concludes with a rhetorical question: "How long will it be before these houses [brothels] will be well known to every young man in the city as they are to Arthur Tappan, E. Wainwright, and their coadjutors?" (24).

Figure 1. "An Anxious or Inquiring Meeting." From *Orthodox Bubbles*. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

- 18 In his study of popular antebellum anticlerical literature, David S. Reynolds used the term "reverend rake" to describe religious reformers who were suspected of hiding their sexual and criminal proclivities under the cloak of respectability which their profession traditionally carried (Reynolds 267). The anonymous play *Magdalen Report: A Farce*, published as a cheap and affordable pamphlet, skillfully exploited Americans' growing mistrust of the clergy. It satirized McDowall in the character of Zachariah Gundy, a self-proclaimed reformer and "a man of business," who claimed that he was an earnest reformer but could be seen around the town in the company of young women of questionable reputation. He had his pockets filled with copies of "Maddening" Report, which he distributed to curious young people all over the town. Its effect was both alarming and comical. Young women, who learned from the report

that prostitutes “make money like smoke,” quit their jobs and hit the streets in search of rich clientele or a suitable residence in a brothel. “There never was such a supply of youth and beauty before,” one procuress cheerfully chirped. Young men, for their part, treated the report as “the City chart, and the guide to the temple of Venus” (Pondergrass 5). Zachariah Gundy opened their eyes to opportunities of random sexual encounters rather than to the dangers of licentiousness. “Before that came out,” one young man confessed referring to the “Maddening” Report, “I used ter stay home o’nights, just like a fool.... But ever since Mr. Gundy give me this Report... I’ve begun to enjoy myself” (3). Enjoyment involved not only illicit sex but also endless drinking, another scourge of antebellum America. Parents and elders moaned in disgust, hoping that Gundy would be “sewed up in a sack and thrown into the river” (10).

- 19 The poem *Phantasmagoria of New-York*, penned by the satirist who wrote under the mischievous nom de plume Obediah Fudge, took aim at the “committee of notorious fanatics” who authored The Magdalen Report with an all-out attack on the clergy. Every “modern saint,” the poem started, was simply a “Demi-devil plaster’d o’er with paint” (3).

These reptiles are a dangerous holy faction,
Religion’s now reduced to a mere trade,
A sort of *speculation*, to be made
On ignorance—strutting with holy zeal,
As they the qualms of conscience keenly feel. (4)

- 20 *Phantasmagoria* then described the alleged findings of the Magdalen Report as a “gross story” and dangerous fiction that besmirched women of New York and made men needlessly suspicious of women in general (7).
- 21 McDowall responded to “sneers, scoffs, reproaches, insinuations, sarcasm, private abuse and obscene caricatures” aimed at himself and other authors of the Magdalen Report with more publications, of which *Magdalen Facts* stands out as a prime example of his commitment to the neo-Puritan traditional of didactic sensationalism (v). It was designed to use what the author called “facts” against accusations of what *Phantasmagoria* described as dangerous “fictions” of the Magdalen Report. To give the book the air of authenticity, it was published as a documentary collection of McDowall’s field reports and diary entries mixed with letters from repentant prostitutes and victims of seduction. But what made the book seem even more authentic were vividly sensational stories of seductions, rape, kidnapping, alcoholism, and suicide among prostitutes and their patrons. In this respect, McDowall anticipated brutal realism of Jacob Riis’s photographic images of New York slums. With an eye on provocative details, as in the story “Two Females” about two young women forced into sex slavery by their African-American captor, McDowall did not seem to be interested in sober meditation on the subject of prostitution but sought to rile his readers’ sense of decency in the name of decency. David S. Reynolds dubbed this approach “immoral didacticism,” which ostensibly had noble goals but tended to “subvert the very meaning of vice and virtue” (57).
- 22 It is likely that *Magdalen Facts* was intentionally shocking in detail to undermine the notion that McDowall, like Zachariah Gundy in *Magdalen Report: A Farce*, promoted licentiousness. The book’s deliberately sad stories about young people who suffered as a result of their irresponsible sexual behavior were certainly not designed to promote reckless lifestyle. But McDowall still could not shake off his detractors’ suspicion of ill

intent, because the notion that exposure of licentiousness actually promoted licentiousness was not farfetched in the 1830s. After all, New Yorkers of that time period became quite familiar with disingenuous reform publications that claimed to be moralistic in nature but in fact promoted the city's sex trade. Jacksonian America saw a rapid rise of pseudo-moralistic press, popular with young men in New York and other cities. Such weeklies as *The Owl*, *Ely's Hawk & Buzzard*, *Polyanthos*, *The Flash*, *The Libertine*, *The Rake*, *The New York Scorpion*, *The Monthly Cosmopolitan*, *Broadway Belle*, and *Venus Miscellany* celebrated the city's sexual decadence while disingenuously decrying the downfall of New Yorkers' morals. *The Libertine*, for example, amused its readers with biographies of famous prostitutes, tepid moralizing about the dangers of libertinism, and snapshots of the lives of promiscuous people. *The New York Scorpion* was also humorously insincere about its goals. Its editor claimed that his publication was devoted to "the prevention and overthrow of VICE in its various forms and shades, [such] as Crimes, Misdemeanors, [and] Prostitution."⁵ As if following McDowall's strategy, he promised to expose the city's ills and "set forth FACTS without embellishment." To this end, he indulged his readers with "full particulars" about "cases of SEDUCTIONS, ELOPMENT AND ABDUCTIONS" (Graham 1). What was clear to everyone, of course, was that such papers did not at all intend to combat licentiousness but rather to promote sexual freedom.

- 23 Those who disliked the Magdalen Report could also point out that it inspired an entire genre of informative guides to the city's sex trade. *Prostitution Exposed; or, A Moral Reform Directory* (1839), whose author wrote under the mischievous penname Butt Ender, reads like a colorful parody of the Magdalen Report. Butt Ender was hardly serious that his pamphlet was a reform publication, but he nonetheless dedicated it to "The Ladies' Reform Association," whom he praised for their efforts "to suppress the evil." He gave the pamphlet a deceitfully serious title: *Prostitution Exposed; or, A Moral Reform Directory: Laying Bare the Lives, Histories, Residences, Seductions, &c. of the Most Celebrated Courtezans and Ladies of Pleasure of the City of New-York: Together with a Description of the Crime and its Effects: As also, of the Houses of Prostitution and their Keepers, Houses of Assignment, their Charges and Conveniences, and other Particulars Interesting to the Public*. The public could, of course, overlook Butt Ender's insincere moralizing. One wonders whether they even paid attention to the ostensibly serious title of the pamphlet the title page of which was positioned right next to a provocatively erotic image of a young woman (Fig. 2). It was also difficult to miss another telling detail: the pamphlet offered a current list of brothels, with short comments about their inhabitants, and even mentioned where to find abortionists. Many other publications of this sort appeared in the aftermath of the Magdalen Report and include *The Bachelor's Guide, and Widow's Manual; Containing Three Thousand One Hundred and Eighty-Six Names of Widow Ladies', and House Keepers in the Cities of New York and Brooklyn* (1842), George Thompson's *The G'hals of Boston; or, Pen and Pencil Sketches of Celebrated Courtezans* (1850), *Fast Man's Directory, and Lovers' Guide to the Ladies of Fashion and Houses of Pleasure in New-York and other Large Cities* (1853), *The Young Man's Guide to Pleasure in New York and All Other Cities* (ca. 1855), and George Ellington's *Women of New York; or, The Underworld* (1869).

Figure 2. Frontispiece to *Prostitution Exposed; or, A Moral Reform Directory*. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

- 24 These publications marked the rise of a new form of sensationalism in that they appealed to readers' voyeuristic inclinations. While American ministers of the colonial era routinely exploited sex scandals in print for strictly didactic purposes, a growing number of nineteenth-century American writers turned to the subject of sex to gratify readers' voyeuristic curiosity about anything related to sex and to satisfy readers' prurient interests. The differences between these two forms of sensationalism were exacerbated by the fact that proponents of voyeuristic sensationalism often ridiculed the conventions of didactic sensationalism promoted by the clergy.⁶ The popularity of the new form of sensationalism coincided with the increase in attacks on the image of clergymen as exemplars of good behavior. The subject of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, which dwells on consequences of a minister's illicit affair with a young woman, deeply resonated with the general public at the time in part precisely because of this trend.
- 25 The rise of sex scandals involving religious figures after the Revolution was dramatic, particularly in the early nineteenth century. When in 1841 one judge faced the task of presiding over the trial of a clergyman who was accused of raping his parishioner, he expressed a concern that would have surprised many of his predecessors. Could he fill the jury box with unprejudiced men who did not automatically assume that *all* clergymen were seducers? It was a legitimate concern. Many Americans at that time grew to believe that religion was merely "a fabric and its professors hypocrites" (*Trial of Rev. Washington Van Zandt* 3). Scores of ministers in antebellum America were accused and tried for crimes that run the entire spectrum of the period's criminal code: brutality, seduction, adultery, homosexuality, financial machinations, theft, murder, and heresy. The trials took place so often, and in so many parts of the country, that it seemed that one scandal metamorphosed into another. Their records, promptly

printed, vented sensationalist news throughout all the states, thus giving the impression that the entire country was engulfed in an epidemic of sex crimes. In that culture, the news of a clergyman on trial ceased to be an exception and became a recognizable archetype in the American press.

- 26 The McDowall controversy in the 1830s was one of many manifestations of these cultural developments. It was preceded by a few notable but not particularly well-publicized scandals involving some clergymen. In 1810 in New York, the Baptist preacher William Parkinson stood trial for assault on the woman who claimed that he raped her. Two years later in New Jersey, Presbyterian David Barclay was tried for adultery. Ammi Rogers, an Episcopal from Connecticut was found guilty of seduction and forcing his victim to have an abortion “with pernicious and poisonous drugs” in 1820. The 1822 case of William Hogan, who was tried for an attempted rape and battery, threw another prominent religious figure into a sex scandal that turned his name into a byword of clerical duplicity. What changed in the 1830s, when McDowall happen to find himself fending accusations of lasciviousness, was that even more cases of ministers’ misconduct started to receive wider sensational coverage in press.
- 27 Perhaps the most notorious case of the decade involved Ephraim K. Avery, a Methodist from Rhode Island. Avery, who was occasionally dubbed as Ephraim “A Very” Bad Man, was tried for brutal rape and murder of a young factory worker named Maria Cornell in 1833. The trial was widely covered in press and turned Avery, who happened to be acquitted for his crime to many people’s dismay, into an object of derision. In 1835, Eleazer Sherman, another Rhode Island clergyman, was convicted in an ecclesiastical court for sodomy. The same year, Charles L. Cook, a former minister, was put on trial as an accessory to theft committed by some boys in his employ. He was earlier (in 1832) found guilty of “lewd conduct” and “highly aggressive and unchristian character,” and left church. The 1835 trial for theft revealed that he was sexually involved with boys in his employ, “lasciviousness in conduct and conversations with youth of his own sex” (*Trial... of Charles L. Cook* 15) The suspicions were confirmed by his wife and some witnesses, one of whom “stated privately that Dr. Cook had often expressed to him his aversion to the female sex, and the he preferred the company of a boy to that of a woman” (11). This, by far, is not a complete list of scandalous revelations involving clergymen in antebellum America, which became more frequent as the time went by.
- 28 The rise of controversial religious movements and sects, whose leaders were endlessly vilified in press, added to Americans’ mistrust of religious figures. Joseph Smith, the Mormon leader, was a target of many New York and other American papers. Attacks on McDowall were also taking place right at the time when New Yorkers indulged in scandalous revelations about the New York sect created by Robert Matthews, who called himself a prophet of God of the Jews or, when the mood struck, simply God. It probably did not help McDowall’s reputation that he was somewhat familiar with the Prophet, who was eventually tried for murder in another widely publicized trial. The 1835 cartoon titled “Mystery of Babylon” reflects the extent of the public’s growing disrespect of religious leaders. It depicts religion as a monster with many heads, each of which represents different forms of Christianity: Catholics, Episcopalians, Calvinists, Universalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Quakers (Fig. 3). In that environment, religious reformers were therefore often targeted because of general mistrust of their profession.

Figure 3. "Mystery of Babylon" (New York, 1835). Library of Congress.

- 29 In 1834 the third Presbytery of New York, which licensed McDowall as a minister, warned him about his initiatives and suggested that he stop publishing his journal. He was charged with financial fraud and "other scandalous things, too bad to name" (McDowall, *Memoir* 311). Soon after that the same court suspended him from the ministry. What is remarkable is that the court's decision was rather ambiguous. It acknowledged that prostitution became a real problem in the city and "that the sin of lewdness is lamentably prevalent in our country." They also expressed their concerns about "the existence and circulation of obscene and immodest prints, of novels and other works, adopted to break down the barriers of natural decency and chaste education, and the direct agency for seduction" (McDowall, *Memoir* 338). It appeared that the Presbytery was close to agreeing with McDowall in his battle against prostitution, but its members chose to distance themselves from his methods. What they believed was that ministers should not go too far in their efforts to expose vice, "lest the very efforts to prevent this vice should themselves become the occasion of its spread."⁷ The ambiguity of the Presbytery's position was quite revealing. It was mindful of the social problems that befell the country and was willing to address it, but it could not endorse provocative methods of combating them. The court's decision read, in a sense, as an implicit condemnation of the American tradition of didactic sensationalism. Whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ministers could openly exploit sex scandals in print for religious purposes, religious authorities in the nineteenth-century chose to stay away from the subject, leaving it essentially to a new brand of writers who happily exploited the subject of sex for its voyeuristic appeal.

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NOTES

1. For the role of religious didacticism in the development of American crime literature, see Alexander Moudrov's "Early American Crime Fiction: Origins to Urban Gothic." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsey (Oxford: Wiley and Blackwell, 2010).
2. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, in *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*, surveyed different sources of other contemporary estimates that argued that anywhere between 4 to 41 percent of women were prostitutes.
3. In her study of McDowall's work, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz incorrectly insists that "[a]lthough McDowall's exposé had plenty of rakes and villains who destroyed the flower of young womanhood, the primary figure in McDowall's account is the male victim" (147). Whiteaker, for his part, writes that "McDowall and his associates demanded that similar punishment be imposed upon licentious mails," but in reality "the double standard prevented the punishment of many licentious men" (91).

4. McDowall found himself amidst a contentious debate over the question whether young people, particularly young women, should be prevented from studying controversial topics. Townsend Stith, in *Thoughts on Female Educations* (1831), argued that it was not necessary for young women to study anything controversial because the “proper sphere of woman is the domestic circle” (16). Other writers timidly recommended a broader kind of education involving not only such subjects as literature and philosophy but also some training that could prepare women for exigencies of what they called “real” life. Almira H. Lincoln Phelps argued in *Lectures to Young Ladies* (Boston, 1833) that God did not intend people to “separate themselves from the world by ceasing to hold intercourse with it; we cannot believe that the Christian, as some zealots teach, is in the performance of his highest duty, by withdrawing from the world and burying himself in a cloister, in order to give his heart wholly to God and the service of religion.” She encouraged young women to go out into the world where “you may do much towards healing the moral deceases of your thoughtless companions” (23-4). William A. Alcott’s popular *Young Man’s Guide* (1834) offers an example of how educators carefully balanced their thoughts on the subject. On the surface, the writer assumed the position of discouraging young men from inquiring into anything that had to do with vice (avoid theaters, licentious publications, etc.). At the same time the *Guide* included several chapters, fairly detailed, on different manifestations of vice, which suggests that Alcott would agree with McDowall’s approach to education.

5. Mottoes of sporting papers were meant to give the impression that their editors adhered to the principles of didactic sensationalism. *Albany Switch*: “From folly’s brow to tear the mask away, make vice himself his dirty face display” (26 April, 1846). *Dixon’s Polyanthos*: “We give each hydra in his den to know,—We buy no favor for we fear no foe” (9 October 1841). *The Libertine* adopted Alexander Pope dictum “Vice is a monster of such hideous mien,—that to be hated needs to be seen” (15 June 1842).

6. For a more extensive discussion of voyeuristic sensationalism, see Alexander Moudrov’s “The Scourge of ‘Foreign Vagabonds’: George Thompson and the Influence of European Sensationalism in Popular Antebellum Literature.” *Transatlantic Sensations*. Ed. John Cyril Barton and Kirstin N. Huston (Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2012).

7. The records of the trial appeared, among other places, in “McDowall’s Trial” (*New York Evangelist*, Nov 5 and 12, 1836) and McDowall’s own publication, *Charges Preferred Against New York Benevolent Society, and the Auditing Committee, in 1835 and 1836, by J. R. McDowall, in the Sun and Transcript, Answered and Refuted by Himself!! In his Own Journal!!! In the Year 1833* (New York, 1836).

ABSTRACTS

The Reverend John R. McDowall is known primarily as a controversial crusader against prostitution in New York in the 1830s. In the first half of that decade, when he lived in the city, he studied causes of prostitution, proposed methods of preventing it, and worked on creating institutions that would allow prostitutes to reenter respectable society. While previous studies of McDowall focused solely on his work as a reformer, it is important to recognize that his publications were an important component of his efforts. The intense hostility to his crusade, which led to his early death, reflected not only his controversial ideas about gender relations and the role of religion in combatting prostitution but also changing literary trends in antebellum America. This article surveys his publications and reactions to them in relation to the rise of new

forms of sensationalist literature, which turned reformers who tackled controversial issues into targets of antebellum American writers and journalists.

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Keywords: John R. McDowall, New York City, reform literature, urban literature, journalism, urban gothic, antebellum American literature

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