

'PEOPLE ARE HAEMORRHAGING STORIES OF

ABSOLUTE HORROR': IRELAND'S BABY TRAGEDY

They were called “mother and baby homes”, but according to a recently released investigation, Ireland’s institutions for unwed pregnant women more closely resembled houses of horror – and giving birth was just the beginning of the nightmare.

By Jane Wheatley

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Babies were routinely taken from their unwed mothers in Irish institutions last century.

Joan McDermott was 16 and fresh out of boarding school when she met her boyfriend Tony, a medical student, in their rural hometown in County Cork, Ireland. Together for about a year, they had sex twice. She fell pregnant.

“I honestly didn’t know that was how you got a baby,” says Joan, now 73 and living in the small coastal town of Cobh in Cork. “When I told my mother I was three months’ pregnant, she said to go upstairs and pack a small bag; I’d be going away. Then she stood in the hallway while I rang my boyfriend. His family ran a well-known local business; he said he was sorry but that he could do nothing for me.”

Joan’s father, a vet, had died earlier that year and her mother was in a new relationship with a local politician. It was the mid-1960s.

“She was about to marry this man – if word of the pregnancy got out it could have ruined his career,” says Joan, a handsome woman with pretty drop earrings and fair hair cut in an elegant short bob. She makes a point of dressing well, she tells me, even to walk her dog in the mornings.

“The next day, I was told to get in the car with them [her mother and future stepfather]. I had no idea where we were going, and nobody said anything for the whole 40-kilometre journey. Then there were these big gates and a house with steps going up to a red door. My mother said, ‘This is a home for unmarried girls, and you will stay here.’ A nun came out onto the steps, they had a few words, then my mother turned on her heel and walked away.”

Joan was taken inside, where she was allocated a “house name,” her identity to be kept secret. “It was a dreadful place, strict and humiliating,” she tells me with finely controlled contempt. “There was no contact with the outside world and I was told if you attempted to leave, the Gardai [police] would bring you back. It was summer when I got there and we girls were put to cutting the lawn with scissors, kneeling on all fours. In the winter months you had to clean the place.”

She had been there for six months when she had her first contractions. “I told a nun and she said I was suffering because of the Devil’s work. When the pain got worse, she put me in a room and left me there all night, alone. There was no pain relief. She came back at 8 am and I said I could feel the baby’s head presenting. I had to walk along a corridor holding it in. There was a metal table, but I couldn’t get up on it, so I lay across it.”

After the birth – a boy – her baby was taken away to the nursery, Joan sent back to her chores. “You weren’t allowed to go to the nursery except when the bell rang for feeding time. One morning, I was breastfeeding when a nun came and took my son away. He was seven weeks old. When I asked where he was, I was told, ‘He’s gone.’”

Two days later, Joan’s mother arrived to pick her up. “She sent me to stay with an aunt in England.”

It was there that Joan eventually rebuilt her life, training as a nurse, meeting and marrying her husband and bearing two more children, both now in their 40s. “I told no one my secret, not even my husband. We’re divorced now.”



Joan McDermott, who fell pregnant at 16, says of meeting her son 47 years later: “I thought my heart would burst.”

FOR MOST OF THE 20TH CENTURY, Ireland was a dreadful place to be single and pregnant. According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, considered the guardian of the nation’s moral health, such women were “grave sinners” and a “disgrace to their families”.

Abortion was illegal and continued to be so until 2018. Illegitimacy – being born out of wedlock – was denounced from the pulpit and remained a legal status until 1987. Families could not bear the shame and girls left home or were sent away, some barely in their teens, some pregnant as a result of rape or incest. Many, like Joan, were terrifyingly ignorant of the workings of their own bodies.

For most, the only escape from destitution was recourse to one of the country’s 14 homes for

unmarried mothers, run by religious orders and funded by the state, or one of the many county homes funded by local authorities. While at their peak in the 1960s and '70s, several of these homes did not close their doors until the late '90s. Unless paid for privately by their families, the women worked their passage by skivvying until, and often after, their babies were born.

A few returned alone to their families; some left to find work where they could; others would stay on in the homes with their babies. After adoption was made legal in 1953 – decades later than in Australia or the UK – almost all illegitimate babies were adopted out. This was often against the wishes of their mothers, though they had little choice in the matter. Until then, there were unofficial adoptions and what was called “boarding out”, a form of fostering.

Babies who remained in the homes did not tend to thrive. Conditions in some were appalling, food was usually poor, and, in the worst places, the mortality rate was at least twice that of the general population.

St Mary’s Mother and Baby Home was one such place, run by the Bon Secours Sisters at Tuam, County Galway. It housed destitute and disabled women and children as well as unmarried mothers who had “fallen” more than once. In 2012, local resident Catherine Corless began to share her research into the history of the home, which operated from 1925 to 1961. She found the names of 796 babies who had died, but no record of their burials. Where were all these small bodies? Not in the local graveyard; not in the churchyards of the parishes where their mothers came from.

As a result of Corless’s dogged, multi-year pursuit of the truth, archaeologists would eventually discover the remains of hundreds of babies, deposited in a decommissioned septic tank in the grounds of the home. It was described as “a chamber of horrors” in 2017 by the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland, Enda Kenny.

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The unfolding scandal of Tuam, with its attendant international media coverage, led the Irish government to set up the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes in 2015. It would scour the records of 18 homes – many of which were incomplete or missing – examining the living conditions for inmates and what happened to them afterwards. It would find that of the 57,000 babies born in those institutions, 9000 died while in their care, the majority without burial records.

Five years in the compiling, when the commission's report landed – 3000 pages – in January this year, it contained quietly devastating details from the testimonies of former residents. Women told how they were stripped of their identities and, like Joan, given “house” names. No matter the cause of a pregnancy there was little empathy, “you were there to atone for your sin.” They spoke of being left alone in labour, as Joan was; some reported complications in later life as a result of their difficult first childbirth.



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Catherine Corless: her discovery that there were no official burials for hundreds of babies at a mother and baby home in Galway, Ireland, led to an investigation into 17 more institutions.

Bonding with babies intended for adoption was discouraged, and they were to be fed on their backs, no cuddling. One woman told of hiding her child in the room for disabled babies so that no prospective adoptive parent would pick him. A few spoke of their time with the nuns as a refuge from violence and poverty at home, or a way to escape public judgment: “You were [considered] an absolute slut if it happened to you.” The rules of admission for one home stated: “This community will direct their attention towards the reformation of unmarried mothers and their children ... but no girls who had a second child will be accepted under any circumstances.”

Some women would go back to their families after the birth but the babies – all too obvious evidence of the mother's “sin” – were rarely welcome. As the report noted, the moral stain of illegitimacy could affect the marriage prospects of other family members. Those who had stayed on as children in the homes and were later boarded out or sent to residential schools spoke of feeling unloved and unwanted – the product of “an evil union.” They, as well as adoptees and birth mothers, told of the enduring pain of searching in vain for family and identity.

At the launch of the report in January, the Taoiseach Micheál Martin said it was “unforgivable” that children born outside of marriage were treated as outcasts. He spoke of their sense of abandonment and of the stigma and lack of birth information which had been

a “terrible burden” in their lives. “We honoured piety but failed to show even basic kindness to those who needed it most.”

The Catholic Church acknowledged “an underlying, but enormously influential, strain of misogyny, and a negative and oppressive attitude to sexuality, particularly in relation to women”.

Such statements were the latest in a litany of mea culpas from church and state prompted by similar official reports over two decades. Investigations of clerical child sexual abuse, of the suffering of children in orphanages and industrial schools and of the slavery of young women working in convent laundries have each thrown light on Ireland’s dark past.

But for those waiting for the commission to acknowledge the fault of church and state in their suffering, the report was a savage disappointment. Noting that women who gave birth outside marriage were subjected to particularly harsh treatment, the report concluded, “responsibility for that harsh treatment rests mainly with the fathers of their children and their own immediate families.”

There were angry and emotional scenes in the Dáil – the Irish Parliament – as the house debated the report. One member said women were not just treated as second-class citizens as described in the report. “They were a caste apart,” she said. “They were untouchable even by their own parents.”

Another was close to tears as he quoted from a 1943 health inspector’s report describing babies in one home as “miserable scraps of humanity, wizened, some emaciated and almost all had rash and sores all over their bodies, faces, hands and heads.” The home in question only closed in 1999.

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In the weeks following the launch of the report, live TV and radio programs carried a stream of interviews with former residents. “It has opened up a huge wound,” says actor-playwright Noelle Brown, who was adopted from a home. “People have taken to the airwaves and are haemorrhaging stories of absolute horror. There isn’t a family in Ireland that hasn’t been affected by this issue. It is massive.”



Children’s socks line a grotto on an unmarked mass grave at the site of the Tuam Mother and Baby Home, which closed in 1961.

CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Many of the 550 witnesses who gave evidence to the commission were shocked to find the report contained only very brief extracts of their testimonies, or nothing at all. “Their courage in coming forward had been utterly disrespected,” says Brown, who was a witness herself. “I was told, ‘Everything you say will be put away and no one will ever hear it.’ I said, ‘Well, why am I here? I want my story to be heard.’”

It later emerged that the audio recordings of the testimonies had been destroyed and there were apparently no transcripts. But after a barrage of protests from witnesses, the Minister for Children, Roderic O’Gorman, said efforts were being made to retrieve the data and provide transcripts to all who requested them.

ON LONG NORTHERN WINTER DAYS under COVID-19 lockdown, I sat for hours on Zoom and WhatsApp calls listening to Irish voices, in turn passionate, angry, and confiding, telling me terrible things. “Well, now, Jane,” they would say, “The thing was, you see ...” Women who as young pregnant girls fled to England to escape censure, and labelled PFI – pregnant from Ireland – were found by the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society of Ireland and brought back to a mother and baby home. “It was prison,” said one, “if you escaped, the Gardai would bring you back.”

So many stories of vanished babies: women would come to the nursery one morning for feeding and find the cot empty. One man who lived in a home from birth recalled going to the local school each day: “We had to sit separately from the other kids; if they were naughty, they were put to sit with us as a punishment.”

Francis Timmons was born in one of the homes and stayed until he was four. “I remember feeling upset and hungry. I was a sickly child, I think. I don’t remember any kindness.” He was then boarded out with a family where he was abused by an older foster brother. In adult life, he worked with The Salvation Army and discovered that babies and children in the homes had been used for vaccine trials. He wrote to the pharmaceutical company responsible, which confirmed that he had been a subject in two trials. The commission found that vaccines had been tested in the homes between 1930 and 1973 but reported no evidence of harm done to the subjects.

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When I call him at his office, where he’s a councillor for the Clondalkin area of Dublin, he’s anxious to make sure I understand the climate of the times: “Every Sunday you had to listen all about sin and you believed it, because the whole country was imbued with it, a culture of control and fear.”

While adoption was illegal in Ireland until 1953, there was a brisk trade in the export of Irish babies to America in the post-war years. According to *Irish Times* journalist Mike Milotte in his 1997 book *Banished Babies*, these unofficial adoptions were arranged by Catholic organisations in both countries: prospective parents were required to be Catholic – no “mixed” marriages – and to promise to raise their adopted babies in the faith.

For much of the latter half of the century, though, Ireland had the highest adoption rate of any country in the world. Although the government introduced an unmarried mothers’

allowance in 1973, it seems women were often not advised about it as a way of supporting them to keep their child. Instead, separation of mothers and babies continued to be the usual practice right up until the 1980s, when attitudes towards single mothers began to soften.

Many women told the commission either that they were pressured to sign adoption papers or didn't recall signing anything at all. Yet the commission decided they were not forced to give up their babies. The report acknowledged that they often had little or no choice in the matter, but that absence of choice was "not the same as 'forced' adoption".

By contrast, in Australia a 2012 senate committee inquiry into adoption practice considered a wider meaning of "force". In fact, the committee found that forced adoption was common. "It occurred when children were given up for adoption because their parents, particularly their mothers, were forced to relinquish them or faced circumstances in which they were left with no other choice."



Joan Burton with her adoptive mother and brother. When she tried to find her birth mother, one nun – who knew her identity – refused, telling her to "go home."

Joan Burton is a former TD – member of the Irish Parliament – and government minister. "We've never had open adoption," she says, "and up to 25 years ago, secrecy was all-pervasive. But modern Ireland has dismantled a lot of taboos, the government has promised legislation to open up birth records and I think there is a majority for it in the Dáil."

Burton was adopted at the age of 2. She loved Bridie, her adoptive mother. "She told me everything she knew about my history, but it wasn't much. I went to the adoption society to find out about my birth mother, but I was warned off: they said you could kill someone with the shock. I sat repeatedly in rooms under holy pictures of Gentle Jesus Little Lamb, meeting nice nuns and difficult ones. I remember one who almost shouted at me: 'What do you want – haven't you two arms and two legs? Go home. I promised your mother on this side of the grave I'd never tell.'"

When she was in her 20s, Burton sent a letter via the adoption society to the parish priest where she had been baptised to let her mother know she was alive and well and getting married. A year later, the letter was returned unopened. "By the time I got the information about my mother, I was in my 50s and she was no longer alive."

It seemed to me, reading, and listening to these stories, that the lasting damage was not so much the misfortune of being an unmarried mother, or the child of one – though that was bad enough – but the secrets and lies that followed. People searching for their birth records from a mother and baby home would be told by the nuns that they had been destroyed in a fire, only to have them turn up, years later, heavily redacted, at Tulsa, the Irish child and family agency.

Unlike Australia, where secrecy surrounding adoptions was reformed in the '80s and '90s, under Irish law adoptees still have no right to their birth records, ostensibly to protect the privacy of the birth parents. "Doctors ask for your family medical history and you can't tell them anything," says one adopted child.

Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin apologised for the state's 'profound failure', after a government report detailed shocking conditions at Catholic Church-run homes for unmarried mothers and their babies between the 1920s and 1990s.

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IN OCTOBER LAST YEAR, as the commission was preparing to publish its report, the Minister for Children, Roderic O'Gorman, announced that its database and the archive of files and records it had amassed would be sealed for 30 years. This was swiftly challenged as a contravention of European Union data protection laws and the minister subsequently promised that the database would be made available and that there would be legislation to enable people to trace their family history.

But this does not go far enough, says Maeve O'Rourke, a human rights lawyer with the Clann project, which campaigns for the rights of unmarried mothers and their children. "As well as access to their own personal data and care records," she says, "they need administrative files with reports from health inspectors and details of who knew what. Without such evidence, how is anyone to push for a police inquiry into what was done to those women and their children?"

Meanwhile Caroline Donovan, a former resident of the Bessborough mother and baby home in County Cork, has lodged a damages action in the High Court against the state, the Health Services Executive, and the Congregation of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary who ran the home.

"The report tried to put it back on the families; that is disgraceful."

TD Kathleen Funchion is the chair of a cross-party committee on children and disability. Last month, she presented a bill that would give adopted people the right to their birth certificates. "We have to start somewhere," she explains. "This should be relatively straightforward and will be at least positive news for adoptees who till now have been denied this simple right."

Will her bill have government support? “I can’t see why not,” she says, “there has been so much public outrage about the commission’s report, which utterly failed to acknowledge the fault of the state in the way women and children were treated. It just seemed to say, ‘Well, this was the way things were.’”

For Francis Timmons, this is one of the most outrageous parts of the commission’s report, too. “The report tried to put it back on the families; that is disgraceful.”

Associate Professor James Gallen, of Dublin City University, was appointed to advise the commission in the principles of transitional justice – a process of recognising and making reparation to victims of human rights abuses. However, he says the commission had signally failed to put the experiences and views of survivors at the centre of its deliberations.

The recommendation that survivors should have access to information about their time in the institutions was “glib,” says Gallen: it would only be of use if it were properly funded and managed. He points to the Australian government funded Find and Connect service as a model resource providing specialist counselling, advice and support to people seeking information about their past in orphanages and children’s homes. Survivors of Irish mother and baby homes would need to be readily equipped with such information in order to put their case for redress, he says.

Past Irish redress schemes have paid out an estimated €1.25 billion for survivors of orphanages and industrial schools, and €31 million for the women who had worked, unpaid, in the Catholic-run Magdalene laundries, but have imposed non-disclosure orders on recipients. Minister O’Gorman has promised no such gagging of mother and baby home survivors. But the commission has recommended that only certain categories of survivors should be eligible for compensation: mothers who spent less than six months in an institution would not qualify, nor would those who had their babies after the introduction of the unmarried mothers’ allowance in 1973.

James Gallen says the restrictions are too narrow. “It is open to government to adopt a more generous posture,” he says, “Ireland has a poor record compared to other countries and this is an opportunity to get it right, but it will need political will.”

Campaigners want to see a centre to memorialise the stories of unmarried mothers and their children. “As well,” says advocate Susan Lohan, “the school curriculum should include this period of our dark history. There is appetite in the country for a more open society.”

Article Appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald

Not raised in a construction family.