

where lindsay was born

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not a happy place



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Beulah House

Ireland's 'house of tears': Why Tuam's survivors want justice for lost and abused children

A harrowing discovery in Ireland casts light on the Catholic Church's history of abusing unwed mothers and their babies – and emboldened survivors to demand accountability. **Sarah Hampson** reports

The reason for the homes was simple and rarely questioned at the time. The mothers were unwed; their children often called "devil's spawn." Set up by the government and run by Catholic religious orders, the mother and baby homes were part of a system to deal with the perceived shame of "illegitimate" children and the women who bore them.

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In the ultra-Catholic Ireland of the time – the St. Mary's home opened in 1925 – there were various institutional ways for dealing with poor, unwanted children. "Illegitimate" children were forcibly separated from their mothers, who were deemed unsuitable parents. From the mother and baby homes many were sent to foster homes at the approximate age of 5 for boys and 7 for girls. Others were formally adopted for a fee – mostly to wealthy North American families. And some were shuttled off to residential schools – known as industrial schools in Ireland – when no family, either foster or adoptive, could be found.

3 The children's early years are dark, spooky closets, inviting curious exploration if anyone dares. Information about large-scale vaccine trials performed on children at mother and baby homes is still emerging. It remains unclear if parental consent was ever obtained. Unscrupulous practices were legion. In 2014, The Irish Independent revealed that remains of 474 infants who died in mother and baby homes were sent to Irish medical schools for research and doctors' anatomical training. Again, there was no evidence of parental consent. Recently, evidence came to light that Glaxo Laboratories – a British company – tested lactose and baby formulas in 1974 at one of the mother and baby homes.

Once, a few children saw their reflections in a car window, parked on the road outside the home. They were excited, thinking there were other children inside until they realized they were looking at themselves. They had never seen their reflections in a mirror. Another recalls feeling frightened at the age of 7 when he was driven to a foster home because the fields, the trees, the houses, were all moving. He had never been in a vehicle before.

The only requirement to take in a foster child at the time was to be a practising Catholic. The availability of children was advertised in local papers. Mr. Haverty says that his foster mother picked him from a group of children in the home because he happened to look up and smile at her. Some foster families were looking for labourers on the farm or for help in the house. "I went from the frying pan into the fire," says Peter Mulryan, 72, who spent the first 4 1/2 years of his life in the home. He was sent to a foster home with a mother in her 70s and a son in his 50s. "I spent most of my time looking after [the mother]," he says. "I worked like a slave, beaten for no reason." Once, his caregivers put stinging nettles in his pants. Another time, he was put in a bag, hoisted over his adult stepbrother's shoulder and carted off to the bog; told he would be left there in a hole. "Shocking treatment," he says in a dignified way as his wife looks on. "I got no loving care whatsoever."

Shards of memory emerge, hurtful and sharp. He was beaten around the head, he says, permanently damaging his ears. "If you spilled any food, you had to get down on the floor to eat it," he says. "And if you go to the toilet on the bed, you sleep on it."

When he was 7, the nuns planned to send him to St. Joseph's industrial school in Letterfrack, northwest of Tuam. But a relative begged some family members not to let him go. "She said, 'If you put him in there, he'll come home in a box,'" he recalls. Established in 1885 by Dr. John McEvilly, then Archbishop of Tuam, the Letterfrack school later became notorious for sexual abuse and neglect of its charges, closing in 1974.

Mr. Duffy was put in an ambulance – the home's transportation of choice as The Grove hospital was down the road. "I didn't know what was going to happen to me," he says. He was taken to the home of his aunt, who had briefly cared for him after his birth. He gobbled biscuits he was so hungry, and immediately vomited. Seeing turkeys in the yard, he grew frantic, not knowing what they were, and ran out to grab them by the neck, killing them by swinging them around. His aunt "was always crying for me," he says. He lived with her until the age of 9 and then lived with his father until he was 20.

"Everyone in this room has a right to know who their family is, who their mother is. It's what we all take for granted when we are born. But these people have been denied records," says Amanda Larkin in a pointed manner. At 32, she is acting as an advocate for her mother, Carmel, 67, a Tuam home survivor who sits docile beside her. Various health authorities and government offices have given incomplete and contradicting information or none at all, she says of her efforts to help her mother identify her own mother and any living relations.

Authorities "were hoping to be able to wait long enough for most of [the survivors] to die off" to avoid paying redress schemes for the abuse, the younger Ms. Larkin says with obvious disgust. But now, if the survivors aren't able to fight, she and others will do it for them. "We don't want sympathy. We want answers. We're not victims. We're survivors," she states defiantly.

"First offenders" at becoming pregnant out of wedlock were sent to mother and baby homes. Different homes had varying policies, but generally the mothers stayed for a year, concealed from society. Then, if they were good and obedient, working for nothing and having paid sufficient penance for spiritual rehabilitation, they could be sent home – without their children. "Your secret would be kept and the price you pay for that is you give up your child," comments James Smith, an Irish-born English literature professor at Boston College and author of *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, who has no personal connection to the mother and baby homes.

Some of the children – the cute ones, says Ms. Corless – were adopted at a price in North America, often without their mothers' consent. John P. Rodgers, a survivor of St. Mary's and an author who wrote a memoir about his experience, *For the Love of My Mother*, now being developed as a Hollywood film script, believes that the available photographs of the home were part of a marketing ploy. "These beautiful photographs of nuns in religious garb taking care of the children with chubby cheeks, white ankle socks and shoes, neat dress, it's a real film shot. I realized that was a staged photograph," he says in an interview.

Unmarried women who had become pregnant more than once were packed off to a Magdalene Laundry, where they often remained for the rest of their lives. The Magdalene Laundries or Asylums, named after Mary Magdalene, a prostitute turned devout follower of Jesus Christ, were church-run institutions in which so-called "fallen" women were illegally incarcerated as slave labourers. The young women were forced to wash and iron laundry in an effort to clean away their sins.

The residential institutions were "all part of the machinery of the state. We had the highest population of incarcerated people in the world in the 20th century," says Katherine O'Donnell, professor of philosophy and formerly of women's studies at University College Dublin. "It was 1 per cent of our population, even more than in Russia, and most of those were poor women and their babies."

Several reports on abuse in religious residential institutions – the Ryan Report in 2009 on clerical pedophilia, and in 2012 the McAleese Report on the Magdalene Laundries – have been insufficient, according to several United Nations committees, lawyers and human-rights activists. During the investigation into the Magdalene Laundries, information surfaced about a high infant-mortality rate at the Tuam baby home. In 2012, Prof. Smith submitted information about a government survey in 1948 which showed a death rate of more than 50 per cent for children under a year born in the Tuam home. It was not included in the McAleese report.

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