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twentieth century Ireland**

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Since 2014, the mother and baby institutions¹ in Ireland have become a topic of national discourse, due primarily to the persistence of historian Catherine Corless and her discovery and highlighting of the placement of 796 infant remains in a septic tank in the Tuam 'Children's Home' or 'Mother and Baby Home' from 1925-1961.² This discovery led to the setting up of the 2015 Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Inquiry (MBHCOI) and international attention on the treatment of single women, children born to parents who were not married and the nature and extent of institutionalisation in Ireland.³

Globally over the past twenty-five years, in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada,⁴ as well as in parts of Northern, Western and Central Europe, there have been an increasing number of Commissions of Inquiry investigating 'historical' institutional child abuse and gender-based violence.⁵ In Ireland, several lengthy reports have been published including the most recent *MBHCOI Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* (2020) published on 12 January 2021 which contains 2,865 pages and was the result of five years of investigation.⁶ The Commission and *Report* addressed the history and experience of 56,000 women and 57,000 children whom it estimates spent time in the fourteen institutions and four County 'homes' under investigation. Terms of reference are key to any commission, and the *MBHCOI's* remit was to examine questions of entry, treatment, vaccination trials, mortality, burials, post-mortem practices and 'exit pathways' of single mothers and their children in the fourteen institutions and a 'representative sample' of county 'homes' (four were included, there were thirty more).⁷ Some 228 institutions are listed in Chapter 2 of the *Final Report* which included industrial and reformatory schools, hostels, Magdalen asylums and other small and sometimes short-lived institutions that require further investigation. Widely criticised by those directly affected, as well as by academics, activists and advocates, the report has not been repudiated by the State, although after a case was taken by a number of survivors to the High Court which resulted in the State acknowledging 'that the rights of mother and baby home survivors were breached when they were not given a draft of the *Final Report* prior to its publication in January (2021)'.⁸

This case study will outline the current historical debates and overview of the institutions, the involvement of the State in their operation and regulation; and the importance of testimony to our understanding of the broader history.⁹ It will also look specifically at the Tuam Mother and Baby institution as a case study of one institution in the West of Ireland.

Historiography and Overview

One of the key questions that emerged after the publication of Catherine Corless's research was why so little had been previously known about the mother and baby institutions.¹⁰ Related to this question was the slow growth of the history of childhood, motherhood, child welfare and institutions, as well as extremely limited access to extant archives.¹¹ These institutions were primarily founded to address the 'problem of the unmarried mother' but those affected by their operation included women who were separated from their children, individuals kept in the institutions, those boarded out or fostered, those adopted and those who died within the institutions. As was discussed at a one-day event on 'Teaching Ireland's Dark History', we will not have a comprehensive history of modern Ireland without the inclusion of the history of Ireland's institutions, the tens of thousands of individuals affected by their operation must be given greater attention from historians.¹²

A few general points can be made about the existing literature. In most institutions, women/girls were overrepresented, primarily due to religious, state, and societal fears surrounding their sexuality or 'the criminalisation and pathologisation of unmarried motherhood'.¹³ From 1922 to the closure of the last mother and baby institution in Ireland in 1998, the reproductive choices and sexual autonomy of women and girls was severely restricted.¹⁴ The Irish State punished family formation outside of marriage, as Sonja Tiernan's chapter addresses, and it would not be until the 1970s that this would begin to be dismantled due in many respects to the work and activism of the feminist and labour movements.¹⁵ The State did not offer sufficient financial support to single mothers and censorship and secrecy ensured many women and girls were unaware or not fully informed of the facts of reproduction and motherhood.

Based on the lived experiences of those who were detained in these institutions and from much of the literature we can say these were cruel, punitive, and repressive institutions where women and children were imprisoned in many instances. Social class, race, ethnicity, and gender affected both the individuals who were sent and their treatment both in the institution and afterwards. Disabled, mixed-race, Mincéir (Traveller), and poor women experienced more severe discrimination. Heteronormativity, the positioning of the family in the Irish Constitution and the overtly masculine nature of Irish nationalism, coupled with the conservatism of Catholic social teaching, had an enormous impact on women's lives.

The institutions were considered by many to be 'charitable' and part of the broader welfare system. Much of this understanding emerged from their establishment and connections with the Poor Law system, as well as through the involvement of religious orders and attitudes to the work of these orders. While conditions varied in different institutions, all institutions were regulated by the State, and all received some State funding. While conditions in most institutions improved over time, family separation remained a feature of the institutions throughout their operation, as did the stigma and shame often attached to being placed in the institutions. One of the overarching features of the development of what became a quasi-carceral system was the prevalence of concern about proselytism, or conversion to another faith, but neither the Catholic Church nor the Church of Ireland are without blame regarding the mistreatment.

Establishment & Emergence: Tuam As A Case Study, 1925-1961

The county homes and the main mother and baby homes were established, financed, and regulated under poor law/public assistance/health legislation. As is usual during moments of crisis, there were people on the side-lines who were alert to the opportunities. Among them were the Catholic bishops, eager to consolidate and extend their influence in any rearrangement of things resulting from the concerted challenge to British political power.¹⁶ The debates in the Catholic periodicals and at council and other meetings demonstrate the beginnings of a system which would operate for the first seventy years of independence. Differences would emerge, such as the formation of publicly funded institutions versus private institutions, but the ethos remained that women should be ostracised, punished and reformed. Their class status would not only relate to social class, but to whether they were a 'first offender' or 'second offender'. They would not be consulted on their children's futures in most instances, and they would often be sent to other institutions or have been previously connected with other institutions. Their autonomy and rights would be curtailed, and their respectability and their family's respectability were entwined.

The Bon Secours sisters had been in the town of Glenamaddy, twenty miles from Tuam, since 1903. In November 1921, the decision had been made to locate the new Children's Home in Glenamaddy. The home would be placed in the charge of the Bon Secours Sisters at a flat rate of 10s per head per week. A committee would be responsible for repairs and for medical care.¹⁷ In 1922, the function of the Glenamaddy Home was set out by the Galway Board of Health as follows: 'For the care of Children and the retrieval of unmarried mothers'. With regard to the type of unmarried mothers that would be 'retrieved', it restricted these to 'first offenders'.¹⁸ While the contractual arrangements and expectations may have been clear, when Sister Hortense and her sisters opened the Home in the burnt-out remnants of the former workhouse, it was not at all fit for habitation. Within a year, the

Galway County Homes and Home Assistance Committee was expressing concern about the 'very high' mortality rate in the institution, for which the 'bad' windows, the 'defective heating' and the generally unsanitary conditions were held to be responsible. There was a cesspit which was 'rather too near' the building, but the committee did not recommend for financial reasons it be taken further away'.¹⁹

Eventually, the sisters took over the Tuam premises on 11 May 1925. At that time, there were eighty-seven infants and children (up to the age of nine years) in their care, and twenty-six mothers. On 2 June 1925, the children travelled the eighteen-mile journey in three ambulances and a motor car.²⁰ A total of seventy-nine children had died in the institution during the previous three and a half years and were interred most probably in the burial area in the workhouse grounds.²¹

Who were the women and children that entered the home? If the death certificates and the other available records for the earlier years may be relied upon, the overwhelming majority of the mothers were 'domestic servants'.²² There were exceptions. In 1926, PK was described as the 'Son of a Farmer's Daughter', while another child was the 'Son of a Tailor'. Death certificates from 1926 and subsequent years show a wide dispersal throughout County Galway, as well as some children from County Clare. In 1925, the year of the transfer to Tuam, its catchment area was expanded, following an agreement between the Galway and Mayo Boards of Health that women from Mayo would be admitted. Detail of family circumstance is available for a small number. In 1926, MC and her three children were in receipt of Home Assistance when their house burned down. All were initially admitted to the Children's Home, but subsequently the mother and one of the children were arrested and charged with the burning of their previous dwelling. In some instances, women were assisted in leaving. In 1925, for example, MO was allowed to leave for America. Others were not so lucky. In April 1924 the Secretary of the Homes and Home Assistance Committee reported that Mrs W, whose husband was 'an Englishman resident in Galway for the past three weeks', was seeking admission of herself and three children to the Children's Home. The request was denied but her husband was pursued for child neglect and given two months hard labour. Two of the children were placed in the home.²³

Significantly, there are examples in the records of so-called adoptions, long before adoption was legalised in 1952. In July 1924 for example, the 'adoption' of EG by a woman in Conamara was recorded. However, when it was discovered that formal agreement was not reached, it was decided that Miss M would accept her as part of the boarding out system.²⁴ The boarding-out system itself, first introduced under the Irish Poor Law Amendment Act (1862), allowed Poor Law Guardians to board-out with local families, children that would otherwise be placed in the workhouse. The

system was re-affirmed in 1924 under the County Boards of Health (Assistance) Order and the Public Assistance Act (1939). From 1922, responsibility for the system fell to the Department of Local Government and Public Health. Virginia Crossman has demonstrated that the policy was not followed uniformly, but in Galway the system was relied upon by many Boards of Guardians into the twenty century.²⁵

'... Any Infant Born In Any Other Circumstances Appears To Have A Better Chance of Life'

On the question of infant mortality, as the Commission has recorded on foot of the pioneering work of Catherine Corless, 796 children died in the home during its thirty-six years, averaging 22.2 deaths per year but ranging from one in 1958 to 53 in 1947. Prior to the move to Tuam, the average number of annual deaths was almost exactly the same in Glenamaddy, but the cohort of children was smaller. Among the certified deaths, the causes of death which were given include debility from birth, congenital heart disease, respiratory diseases, meningitis, measles, congenital syphilis, influenza, marasmus, malnutrition, premature birth, skin diseases, whooping cough, ear infections, chicken pox, convulsions/epilepsy, cerebral haemorrhage, gastroenteritis. If there was concern about the high mortality rate (or indeed about an apparently unceremonious approach to the disposal of the mortal remains) there is little evidence of this in the contemporary record. The children of Tuam like so many other institutions did not appear to be afforded the same concern as many outside of institutional care – both in life and in death.

Conclusion

During the 'Decade of Centenaries' in Ireland, questions over what or who we choose to commemorate and memorialise, in the context of the violent and traumatic foundation of the State and how we do so politically and culturally, have been to the fore.²⁶ Institutions that incarcerated women and children have also been the focus of studies and debates about memory, commemoration and cultural trauma.²⁷ However, much greater attention deserves to be given to their role in Irish history, the class implications of their operation as well as their impact on families and communities. Until we fully integrate the history of these institutions into our national discourse, we do not take into account the relevance of social class, cultural power, political power and the patriarchal nature of Irish society.

Notes

All web references for this piece were retrieved on 12 December 2022.

- 1 The term institutions will be used as opposed to 'home' for this piece. See Caroline McGregor, Carmel Devaney & Sarah-Anne Buckley, *Language, Terminology and Representation Relating to Ireland's Institutions Historically Known as 'Mother and Baby Homes', 'County Homes' and Related Institutions*, (UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, University of Galway, 2023).
- 2 See Dan Barry, 'The lost children of Tuam', *New York Times*, 28 October 2017; Catriona Crowe, 'The Commission and the survivors', *Dublin Review of Books*, Summer 2021. See also work by Conall Ó Fatharta <https://conallofatharta.wordpress.com/>; 'Mother and Baby Home Scandal Hidden in Plain Sight', *Irish Examiner*, 5 June 2014 www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/mother-and-baby-scandal-hidden-in-plain-sight-271157.html For a discussion of the foundation of the institution and research used in this case study see Sarah-Anne Buckley & John Cunningham, 'Remembering and Forgetting: The Tuam Mother and Baby Home and the Irish Revolution', in Linda Connelly (ed), *Women and the Irish Revolution: Feminism, Activism and Violence*, (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2020), pp. 198-215.
- 3 See Sarah-Anne Buckley, 'Gender and institutionalisation: from the Foundling Homes to the Mother and Baby Institutions' in Jyoti Atwal, Ciara Breathnach & Sarah-Anne Buckley (eds) *Gender & History: Ireland, 1852-1922*, (Routledge, New Delhi & London, 2022).
- 4 *Final Report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Inquiry* (Dublin: 2020).
- 5 *Age of Inquiry: A Global Map of Institutional Abuse Inquiries* www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/research/ageofinquiry/index.html.
- 6 *Final Report MBHCOI*.
- 7 Chapter Two, *MBHCOI Final Report*.
- 8 See www.thejournal.ie/mother-and-baby-home-commission-high-court-settlement-5633597-Dec2021/
- 9 See Máiréad Enright & Aoife O'Donoghue (eds), *Alternative Executive Summary of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Inquiry*, (2021). As the authors and editors of the *Alternative Summary* state 'academic expertise is not more important than expertise by experience'.
- 10 For a discussion of the emergence of activism and testimony in the case of the Magdalene institutions see Nathalie Sebbane, *Memorialising the Magdalene Laundries: From Story to History*, (Peter Lang, Oxford, 2021).
- 11 See Joseph Robins, *The Lost Children: A Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700-1900*, (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1980); Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin, 1922-1960*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007); Caroline Skehill, *History of the Present of Child Protection and Welfare Social Work in Ireland*, (The Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 2004); Sarah-Anne Buckley, *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889-1956*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013); Paul Michael Garrett, 'Excavating the past: Mother and Baby Homes in the Republic of Ireland', *British Journal of Social Work* 47, pp. 358-374; Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke & James M. Smith, *Redress: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice*, (UCD Press, Dublin, 2022).
- 12 www.universityofgalway.ie/irish-centre-human-rights/newsevents/conference-on-teaching-the-dark-history-of-irelands-institutions.html. See also testimonies from those directly affected for example the CLANN Project <http://clannproject.org>; Justice for Magdalenes Research (<http://jfmresearch.com>), Waterford Memories (<https://www.waterfordmemories.com>) and the Tuam Oral History Project (www.universityofgalway.ie/tuam-oral-history).
- 13 *First Report of the Collaborative Forum of Former Residents of Mother and Baby Homes and Related Institutions* (Dublin, 2022).

- 14 See Caelainn Hogan, *Republic of Shame*, *op. cit.*
- 15 *Alternative Executive Summary*, p.8.
- 16 At the Viceregal Commission on Poor Law Reform, Myles Keaven, proposed a major reconfiguration for Co. Galway as early as 1904. Keaven urged that all but two of the county's workhouses be closed, and that dedicated social services, under religious management, be provided in the vacated buildings: 'The one given to the sisters would be for fallen women', he wrote, 'and I would have strict rules attached to this and not allow poor girls who were led astray under false pretences to mix with poor unfortunates'.
- 17 *Connacht Tribune*, 19 November 1921.
- 18 GC5/2, Galway County Council, 1922. This was five years before the *Report into the Sick and Destitute Poor Including the Insane Poor* which is often cited as the official stance on this.
- 19 *Connacht Tribune*, 18 November 1922.
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 MBHCOI, *Fifth Interim Report*, 15 March 2019, p. 59.
- 22 For access to all death certificates see www.IrishGenealogy.ie.
- 23 See Buckley & Cunningham, 'Remembering and Forgetting', *op. cit.*
- 24 GC5/3, Galway County Council, 1924.
- 25 Virginia Crossman, 'Cribbed, contained and confined? The care of children under the Irish Poor Law', *Éire-Ireland*, 44, 1&2, Spring/Summer 2009, pp.37-61.
- 26 For a discussion of memory and commemoration see Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019) and Oona Frawley, *Irish Cultural Memory Volumes 1: History and Modernity*, (Syracuse University Press, 2010).
- 27 See for example Emilie Pine, 'Introduction: moving memory', *Irish University Review*, 47:1, pp.1-6.