Healing the Pain of the Past: Ireland's Legacy of Shame

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Healing the Pain of the Past
Ireland’s Legacy of Shame

EAMON MAHER

LAST SUMMER, I finally got around to reading two heart-rending accounts of the treatment of women in certain Irish institutions, particularly the infamous Magdalene Laundries. The two books are anything but easy reads, but they tell stories that Irish people need to hear; stories of unpaid labour, physical and psychological abuse, discrimination, and a lifelong residual feeling of inadequacy and guilt among the former inmates of these institutions. On the 19 February, 2013, An Taoiseach Enda Kenny uttered the words of apology that so many of the women had longed to hear and he showed the type of genuine emotion that moved the survivors who were in the gallery of Dáil Éireann on that historic occasion.

The young documentary and film-maker Steven O’Riordan had been instrumental in bringing about the government climb-down through his work as Head of the Magdalene Survivors together group. He notes that over 30,000 women passed through the Magdalene Laundries since the first one was set up in 1765. The last one closed its doors in 1996: it is staggering to think that there could still have been any such establishment in Ireland at the beginning of the Celtic Tiger period. O’Riordan observes:

In 1991, when the last woman was admitted to a laundry, Ireland had its first female President in Mary Robinson. Roddy Doyle’s film The Commitments was showing a hip modern Ireland. When, in 1994,
Riverdance exploded onto the world stage leading to the belief that everything Irish was great, there were still women enslaved in the laundries.\textsuperscript{1}

Clearly, in many ways Irish society was becoming more progressive and confident in itself in the 1980s. However, there were many skeletons still lurking in the cupboards. It was largely thanks to the work of investigative journalists and the determination of the women themselves, that the full story of what occurred in the Magdalene Laundries came to light. What happened to them is an indictment, not just of the religious orders who ran them, but also of generations of Irish politicians, civil servants, Gardaí, lawyers, doctors and all the others who knew what was taking place and did nothing about it. Families and local authorities sent girls and young women to these places, often for no good reason other than that they had acquired the reputation of being troublemakers, or were pregnant outside of wedlock, or happened to be the illegitimate daughters of other unfortunate women in an Ireland that was harsh and unforgiving when it came to any sexual indiscretion or social stigma. Sometimes, the families simply could not provide for their children. When assessing what occurred behind the walls of places like the Magdalene Laundries, we should not hide behind the excuse that these things happened in a dim and distant past because, as we have seen, they were going on up to a few decades ago.

Martin Sixsmith’s astonishing recreation of Philomena Lee’s 50-year search for her son, Anthony, who was cruelly taken from her when he was three years old, caused many ripples when it was made into a successful film with Judi Dench in the main role. Like so many others, Philomena had become pregnant during a relationship she had with a Limerick civil servant, who may not even have known of her condition.

\textsuperscript{1} Steven O’Riordan and Sue Leonard, \textit{Whispering Hope: The True Story of the Magdalene Women} (London: Orion, 2015), pp. 10-11. Subsequent references will give in-text page numbers only.
She ended up in Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea, where there was a mother and baby home. I am from Roscrea myself and never realised Sean Ross had been used for this purpose until the publicity surrounding the film version of the book, *Philomena*, brought it to my attention. During my youth, Sean Ross was a place where children with disabilities were cared for in what appeared to be a compassionate environment.

Since reading Martin Sixsmith’s wonderful account, I visited Sean Ross and was moved to see the burial place of Anthony (whose adopted name was Michael Hess) in the ruins of the lovely old abbey. He had made the trip to Ireland with his partner Pete in 1993 after discovering he had contracted full-blown AIDS and only had two years to live. His cherished wish before he died was to be reunited with his birth mother (a wish that could have been realised had the nun he met during his visit, revealed to him where he could find Philomena, who equally had contacted Sean Ross around this time seeking information about her son). It is hard not to feel angry when reading about the exchange between the sister and the successful American attorney about the whereabouts of his mother. While she agreed to consider the proposition he put to her that he be buried in the grounds of Sean Ross where he had been born in return for a significant donation, she remained tight-lipped about what happened to Philomena when she left the institution. At one point, Anthony lost patience and raised a very important point:

‘What about the money you took from the Americans who came here looking for babies? The money you took from my parents? Is there no record at all of all the graft and corruption that went on over that?’

The dying man emphasised to the octogenarian nun that he did not wish to cause problems by raking up the past. The records of the abbey were destroyed once the scandals broke, but that did not mean that she could not have assisted Anthony in his quest. Four decades previously, his mother had arrived in Sean Ross and was refused painkillers during labour, as suffering is the price to be paid for sin.

As Mother Barbara said to her at that time: ‘You are the cause of this shame. Your own indecency and your own carnal incontinence.’ (17)

MONEY AND POWER

Throughout the two books discussed in this article, the negative reinforcement never ceases to rain down on the unfortunate inmates:

The nuns told the girls their scrubbing, wringing and ironing symbolized the cleansing of the mortal stain on their souls, but they were also profitable for the convent: the Church may have been saving souls, but it was not averse to making money. (22)

This is a point which the senior civil servant Joe Coram points out to the Minister to whom he is responsible, Frank Aiken, before his meeting with the then Archbishop of Dublin:

‘Whatever you say to McQuaid tonight, this system suits too many people. Every child sent to America is a donation more for the Church and a problem less for the state. Everyone’s got a stake in keeping things the way they are.’ (30)

Coram puts his finger on the nub of the problem here. The State was perfectly happy to allow the Church to deal with many social problems, as this meant they didn’t have to invest money in buildings and staff which would deal with orphans, juvenile offenders or unmarried mothers.

If the State was complicit, so too was society at that time. Families often did all in their power to deflect the shame associated with a family member who could not be cared for or who had made unfortunate choices that led to pregnancy or petty crime. Thus, they committed children and young adults to the care of religious institutions and conveniently failed to ask any questions about their fate after incarceration. The mechanisms put in place to investigate what actually went on in places like the Magdalene laundries may not have been very sophisticated, but there was always a strong tendency to accept the word of the religious orders running them for fear of upsetting the status quo.

Joe Coram, in conversation with the former Health Minister Noël Browne, who notoriously came into conflict with the Catholic Church
over the Mother and Child Bill, was left in no doubt as to where the power resided in Ireland at that time: 'The hierarchy are the factual instrument of government in social and economic policies [...] Our prospects for the preservation of an effective cabinet government and for badly needed reforms are utterly gone.' (41)

No one was better placed than Browne to appreciate the reality of Church influence on the State at that time. This is why the irregular issuing of US passports to Irish babies being adopted by American parents, the payment of a generous donation to the religious orders for this privilege, the pressure placed on vulnerable young mothers to sign forms stating they gave up all claim to their children, were all conveniently overlooked.

TURMOIL

As a highly successful lawyer who worked at the highest level of Reagan’s Republican White House in America, Anthony (or Mike, as he came to be known) is genuinely astounded that normal protocol could be ignored in such a blatant fashion. His quest to meet Philomena runs into roadblock after roadblock, as the religious orders cover their tracks and the civil authorities deny any knowledge of what happened. Brought up a Catholic and having as his adoptive uncle Bishop Loras Lane (who is portrayed in a very sympathetic manner, it has to be said), Mike should have been prepared for opposition to any possible threat to the Church’s reputation and standing. At university in Notre Dame, his admission of homosexuality was met with little empathy or understanding by his confessor, Fr Adrian:

‘Homosexuality is a sin, whatever form it takes. If you submitted to the sinful urges of another, the wickedness of that sin is transferred to you. Homosexuality – he spat the word out – is a disease, a sickness. It is unnatural and evil. There is no place for homosexuality in the Catholic community.’ (200)

He could not have received a clearer delineation of the Church’s position on homosexuality had he been living in Ireland. Later on, the priest reinforced his message and confirmed Church teaching on the subject: ‘[...] the inclination to homosexuality is an objective
The young man found himself torn between his faith and his sexual inclination and this resulted in turmoil. He had to keep his sexuality a secret in his professional life, as the Republican Party at that time was not sympathetically disposed to gay people. He must have often wondered whether meeting his birth mother would help him to understand who he was and perhaps he would have found in her presence the type of unconditional love that heals many wounds. But that was not to be. In a strange parallel to how Mike is made feel about his sexual preferences, Philomena is conditioned to accept that she will never be an adequate mother to her son. Mother Barbara says to her on one occasion:

‘You must forget your child, for he is the product of sin, and above all you must never speak of him to anyone. The fires of hell await sinners like you, and if you go on talking about your baby to other people, you will burn in them forever’ (436).

Words like these stick in a person’s mind and fill them with a feeling of self-disgust and inadequacy. This is a good juncture to make a link between Philomena and Whispering Hope, because the testimonies of the women who feature in the latter mirror closely the experience of Philomena.

WHAT REALLY MATTERED

For example, Kathleen, the daughter of an unmarried mother, is told that she is ‘devil spawn’ (15) and that appears to justify the cruelty that is meted out to her by her aunt and the nuns. She notices how the priest assigned to the Laundry turned a blind eye to the violence being visited on the women, a brutality that was obvious to even the most casual observer: ‘All that mattered to him was that you went to Mass on Sundays, and took the sacraments of confession and communion.’ (18) Kathleen ends up in hospital with a bad dose of pleurisy and the nuns who come to visit her are dismissive of Noel Browne’s proposals that unmarried mothers should receive support from the State:

‘Paying penitents who are selfish enough to hold on to their babies? I’ve heard it all now’, said Fidelis, as Frances Bernadine pursed her lips in disapproval. ‘He’s a terrible man altogether.’
‘Ah, Archbishop John Charles McQuaid will soon put him in his box’, said Sister Bernadine. (50)

There can be no doubt who the villain and the hero are in this sketch. The sisters have absolute confidence in the power of the Archbishop of Dublin to influence government decisions and bring unruly elements like the Minister for Health to heel. In a sense, the theocracy that was Ireland in the 1940s and 50s allowed abuse in the home and in religious-run institutions to continue unchecked. It did not matter too much what you did once you were considered to be a good-living Catholic who was deferential to the power of the Church.

Thinking back on his youth in Roscommon and Leitrim, the writer John McGahern observed that the main reason people got married was for sex: there was no other way of having it. After marriage, there was, generally speaking, a large number of children in rapid succession. The main consequence of marriage therefore was children, who often went hungry as there wasn’t the money to provide an adequate amount of food to feed them properly. As a result, religious life took on a real allure for many Irish people:

The ideal of the society was the celibate priest. The single state was this elevated. The love of God was greater than the love of man or woman; the sexual was seen as, sin-infected and unclean.\(^3\)

This attitude is discernible throughout *Whispering Hope*. Marie is abused by her grandfather and then forced to spend years in various institutions to atone for her sins. When she is experiencing excruciating pain during childbirth (as recently as 1976, it should be noted), the young woman is offered little solace from the nun at her bedside:

‘Ah Marie’, she said, looking at me as if I was dirt. ‘You should have thought of the consequences before getting yourself in this mess. Tell me, was the two minutes of pleasure worth all this?’ (261-62)

Marina, who is sent to the Good Shepherd convent in New Ross, admits that she could not wait to get out of Ireland, where she would always be considered an orphan and a sinner. She recalls how the

nuns called them fallen women: ‘But the only time I fell was when I fainted with hunger. I didn’t know anything about men. I had never been with a man.’ (116)

LET DOWN

The vast majority of the women who were prisoners in the Magdalene Laundries had committed no crime. They naturally feel let down by a State that was complicit in the pain that was inflicted upon them, in some cases for many years. Nancy confided her woes to a Redemptorist priest, only to be told that she must do her penance, but one wonders what sin she has committed to justify such hardship. She is sent out to work for a farmer who hit her so hard one day that she had to go to hospital after the wound caused by the blow became infected. The nurses were kind, but they never thought to ask themselves, or her, how she had come to have such a nasty wound.

Diane, who spent three years in the Sisters of Mercy Summerhill Training School (where very little actual training occurred), managed to hold on to a strong faith in spite of the cruelty she encountered in that place. She even goes so far to suggest that the nuns themselves were often victims too in that they were forced into convents by their families and sometimes took their frustrations out on those who were in their care. Once more, Marie puts things in context:

I think about what happened in the laundries every single day. And I don’t just blame the nuns. I suspect other people knew about the laundries. I can’t help but feel that the families knew and the politicians – I strongly suspect the whole lot of them knew. And I blame them all. (279)

She is undoubtedly correct in her assessment. It is important to realise that the Magdalene Laundries were the product of a puritanical society in the young Irish State which demonstrated an unforgiving and unhealthy attitude to sex. Pointing the finger at one group, in this case, the nuns, exonerates the State and society for their abdication of responsibility for the wellbeing of the women committed to their care. Remember that the Laundries would never have come into existence if there was not a perceived need for them. They would not
have continued as long as they did either if key interest groups were not benefiting from them – remember the civil servant Joe Coram’s comment about how such homes suited too many people.

DIGNITY
The life story of Philomena and that of the women described in *Whispering Hope* should be prescribed reading for any student of Irish history, because 30,000 such women passed through the doors of the Magdalene Laundries. Very few of them got to describe what happened to them during their period of incarceration, or how the time spent in these hateful places impacted on their lives.

But they must not be forgotten, because they represent a major failure on the part of everyone living in Ireland at that time who failed to speak out on their behalf and demand that their mistreatment cease with immediate effect. It is extraordinary how dignified the survivors are, how supportive they are of one another. I suppose that when people have a shared past of suffering and grief, they recognise the pain in others and try to bring healing. It seems fitting to leave the last word with Marie, who describes how she felt when she met with other survivors:

We were orphans or had been abused, we had nobody, we needed help. The last thing we needed was punishing. But that’s what we got. There was so much hurt in that room. There has been so much hurt in this so called beautiful country, and it’s all locked behind the door. Pushed away. Sometimes, I think it would have been better if someone had put me in a bucket of water when I was a baby and drowned me, like a kitten. (280)

On the contrary, I think it is marvellous that Marie survived and that she got to recount her story of victory over adversity and to highlight the legacy of shame that still lingers over the happenings in the Magdalene Laundries.