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# The FURROW

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## The Mother and Baby Homes' Report

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Mid-April brought news that the high-profile Philomena Lee had begun legal proceedings aimed at ‘quashing parts of the final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes’. Four other persons were granted leave to bring challenges ‘over not having the opportunity to make submissions on sections of the draft report concerning them before the report was finalised.’<sup>1</sup> The cases were adjourned until May and - at the time of writing - their outcome is awaited. Such legal challenges appeared increasingly likely in the weeks following the publication of the Commission’s final report in January.<sup>2</sup> Some months on, they may well be viewed as the inevitable outcome of what appeared a campaign - supported by key figures within the Irish political and media establishments - to undermine the work of the Commission and discredit its findings.

## RUBBISHING THE REPORT

Two days after the release of the Commission’s final report, for instance, the *Irish Times* gave over its front-page lead to parliamentary sketch-writer Miriam Lord. Lord used this platform principally to highlight the contribution of Leas Cheann Comhairle and Galway West TD, Catherine Connolly, in Dail Eireann the previous day.<sup>3</sup> Connolly had set out to effectively rubbish the report, describing it as ‘inconsistent, shocking, poorly written, disturbing’ and ‘absolutely repulsive’. A *Sunday Times* editorial, in late February, would express concern about Catherine Connolly’s contribution, noting how it had ‘set the tone’ for much of what followed, ‘with other TDs enthusiastically trashing the comprehensive research by a judge, an international adoption

1 ‘Lee to challenge mother and baby homes report’ *Irish Times*, 13th April 2021, p.1

2 *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes*, published 12th January 2021

3 M. Lord ‘State’s record on lost voices and broken promises shredded in Dail’, *Irish Times*, 14th January, 2021, p.1

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expert and a historian'.<sup>4</sup> Miriam Lord's concern - in contrast - was to extoll Connolly's performance, declaring it 'the most honest and powerful contribution of the day.' Such front-page feting of Connolly by the *Irish Times* had predictable enough consequences, amounting to little short of a rallying cry to an array of willing detractors.

'The real issue', that *Sunday Times* editorial proposed, 'was that the Commission's findings - including that Irish society was as much to blame for mother and baby homes as church or state - were not to everyone's liking.' The 'relentlessness and bitterness of the criticism' it argued 'has exceeded an acceptable threshold'. Identifying the role played by 'lobby groups' in intensifying criticism, the *Sunday Times* cited an accusation from the Coalition of Mother and Baby Home Survivors that the Commission had 'become part of a cover-up' - something it dismissed as a 'ludicrous claim'. The editorial continued 'Clearly, some people wanted the commission to adopt, unquestioningly, the testimony of survivors. They wanted the report to endorse the modern narrative about the church and state being entirely to blame for the existence of these homes. Anything else was unacceptable.' But what was the point, the *Sunday Times* wondered, 'in appointing three experts to be mere stenographers of witness statements and to deny them the use of their critical faculties, or tell them not to sift or analyse, not to be objective or critical?' This very fundamental question seems especially pertinent in the light of Philomena Lee's recent challenge. Among its objectives, according to the *Irish Times*, is the 'quashing' those parts of the report which 'do not accurately reflect her evidence to the commission'.<sup>5</sup>

### 'POLITICAL GRANDSTANDING'

The *Sunday Times* editorial also highlighted the behaviour of Sinn Féin's Kathleen Funchion, who chairs the Oireachtas Children's Committee. Funchion (praised, too, by Miriam Lord) accused the Commission of having 'repeatedly added to survivors' distress' and proposed that Judge Yvonne Murphy appear before the Children's Committee. 'To no great surprise' the editorial remarked 'Judge Murphy declined the invitation', adding that these kinds of 'Oireachtas hearings' are widely viewed as 'platforms for political grandstanding, rather than for elucidating and examining.' The *Sunday Times* noted, with concern, those calls made for a change in law, to compel investigators to present themselves before such

4 'Who would want to sit on a commission of inquiry now?' *Sunday Times* (Irish ed.) 28th February 2021, p.16

5 *Irish Times*, 13th April, 2021, p.1

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committees. All of which led the newspaper to pose the basic question: 'After the way members of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission have been treated since publication of their report', it asked 'who would ever want to lead such an inquiry again?'

Even this brief critique of reaction to the Commission's final report points up a range of questions which Irish society might usefully consider: What kind of assumptions, for example, are encouraged around investigations of this kind? Are those termed 'victims' and 'survivors' effectively set up for further trauma, through the nurturing of unrealistic expectations? Are various advocacy groups, purporting to represent their interests, genuinely helping their healing and well-being? How can a comprehensive report of this scale - inevitably contextualizing the narratives it receives - avoid seeming to relativize personal testimonies? How can a wider society begin to grasp complex historical realities when leading parliamentarians prioritize 'grandstanding' over informed analysis? <sup>6</sup> What might induce a more mature and insightful political response in a culture where prominent media outlets act as cheerleaders for the most derogatory of reactions? And - perhaps most fundamentally - where, from within this same culture, could the stimulus possibly come for these kinds of questions to be countenanced and considered?

### APPORTIONING BLAME

Its attributing of 'blame' to a variety of elements within Irish society and refusal to isolate church or state was - as the *Sunday Times* suggested - the rock on which the Commission's work appeared to perish. What, we might ask, is really going on here? Reflecting on the fall-out from the Ryan Report, in 2009, communications specialist Terry Prone - experienced in working with Catholic religious - probed the demonizing of congregations and orders in the wake of that report. Regarding the issue of blame, Prone wrote, 'Humanity always seeks to site evil within a discrete group which is visibly different to the majority.'<sup>7</sup> She went on to reference Solzhenitsyn's conviction that 'the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either - but right through every human heart - and through all human hearts.' The 'complex implication' of this insight, Prone believed, had 'gone unaddressed' in the aftermath of Ryan. A decade on, it appears to remain unaddressed and Irish society seems neither willing nor able to face such uncomfortable

6 e.g. The week following her shredding of the report, Catherine Connolly acknowledged to the Dail (20th January 2021) that she had still only read parts of it.

7 Terry Prone, 'Bricks on the Road to Hell' pp. 84-94 in Tony Flannery (ed.) *Responding to the Ryan Report*, Columba Press (2009)

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truths. Reluctant to accept any personal responsibility for what may be ailing in society, we find it more comfortable to scapegoat and attach blame to those entities we conceptualize as ‘other’. It was telling to note how so many Catherine Connolly enthusiasts were drawn to that part of her speech where she declared ‘I am not responsible. My family is not responsible. The people I know are not responsible.’<sup>8</sup> These lines, at least, were regularly cited by her admirers. Given that the report had covered a 76-year period, the notion that one could simply declare various generations of one’s family exempt from anything contributing to the Mother and Baby Homes’ phenomenon suggested a naivety about the complexity of the past on Connolly’s part.

Writing in the same volume as Terry Prone - back in 2009 - retired social worker and former Mercy Sister, Margaret Lee, highlighted the work of post-war psychoanalyst Eric Erickson. Lee explained how, for Erickson, ‘The final task of human development’, is the ability ‘to negotiate integration versus despair. By this he meant that towards the culmination of our lives we must be able to consider all the things that have happened to us and integrate them, accepting them as part of the whole.’<sup>9</sup> Margaret Lee went on to offer the following striking analysis in respect of contemporary Ireland: ‘When I apply this to Irish society, I think that we are still very young and immature. We are not able to look at life in the round and we are not able to hold good things and bad things in our consciousness at the same time. We want to simplify people, life, and its myriad events into dichotomies - good/bad, success/failure, brave/cowardly.’ The Commission’s final report could be viewed as attempting - in certain respects - to coax today’s Ireland beyond such simplification and instinctive recourse to dichotomies.

### ‘THAT AWFUL ERA’

Public awareness and perceptions, however, remain heavily dependent upon national media and how they choose to pitch and present a story. Given the length of the Commission’s final report and the likelihood that few would even read its executive summary, a special responsibility rested with the Irish media to accurately convey its core themes. It is far from clear, though, that this happened in practice. The *Irish Times* began its coverage - the day following the report’s release - with the statement that ‘Ireland has again been brought face-to-face with its cold and callous past’.<sup>10</sup>

8 Leaders’ Statements on the *Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes*, Dail Eireann, 13th January 2021

9 Margaret Lee, ‘Searching for Reasons: A former Sister of Mercy looks back’, pp. 44-55, Flannery (2009)

10 ‘From the graves of innocents’, *Irish Times*, 13th January 2021, p.1

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The statement is nowhere to be found in the actual document and appeared to reflect, on the part of that newspaper, as much a concern to editorialize as to report. One of the piece's authors, Patsy McGarry, followed up with an 'Opinion' column inside the same edition. McGarry spoke of 'the Ireland of 50 years and more ago', describing it as 'that awful era'.<sup>11</sup> The painful testimonies included in the report and often brutal treatment of those pregnant outside marriage clearly offer grounds for soul-searching and a thorough interrogation of aspects of our country's past. The reduction of our forebears and their world to crude characterizations, on the other hand, is hardly just or accurate and suggests more of an ideological crusade than a genuine desire to inform.

Moreover, even in today's changing media environment, the lingering influence of the *Irish Times* on the country's journalism should not be underestimated. A columnist in the Belfast daily, the *Irish News*, addressed the Commission's report the weekend after its publication. Mary Kelly wrote of 'the damning indictment of a 'cold and callous' Ireland (Kelly's quote marks) revealed in the Mother and Baby Homes report published earlier this week.'<sup>12</sup> Kelly and her editors appeared oblivious to the fact that she was referencing the *Irish Times*, with this quote, and not the report itself. The day following the report's release, meanwhile, the *Irish News* gave pride of place - and the largest headline amidst its coverage - to an item entitled 'Shame lies with Catholic Church.'<sup>13</sup> Journalist Allison Morris began this comment piece as follows: 'The shame and neglect of women and children in Ireland's mother and baby homes lies fairly and squarely with the Catholic Church, who not only owned the homes but created a society where single mothers were deemed sinners to be locked away.' Within this opening sentence, alone, Morris had misrepresented the report on at least two counts. It came nowhere close to leaving the blame 'fairly and squarely with the Catholic Church', while even a basic engagement with the document would have revealed that, of those institutions investigated, the majority were not owned by the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup>

11 Patsy McGarry, 'We must now pay a price for our past wilful silence', *Irish Times*, 13th January 2021, p.12

12 Mary Kelly, 'Churches must have skipped that bit in the gospels about not casting the first stone', *Irish News*, 16th January 2021, p.28

13 Allison Morris, 'Shame lies with Catholic Church', *Irish News*, 13th January 2021, p.3

14 Of the 17 institutions investigated, 7 were owned by local authorities, 6 were Catholic-owned, 3 Protestant-owned, while one other - 'The Castle' in Co. Donegal - is described as having been 'established, funded and governed' by a combination of the North-Western Health Board and the Catholic dioceses of Raphoe and Derry.

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### ‘THE PREVAILING NARRATIVE’

Comment pieces of this kind appear all too regularly in Irish newspapers, offering correspondents - under the veil of ‘Opinion’ or ‘Analysis’ - a licence to ignore unwelcome facts and present developments in ways which cohere with their own prejudices. In the context of covering the Mother and Baby Homes’ story, they were important in blunting the impact of the report’s conclusions and - in enabling existing stereotypes to retain dominance - served to undermine the work of the Commission. In its own way, the Commission may well have foreseen this reluctance to engage with the perspectives it offered. In the introduction to the final report, it states - in bold print - that any commission of investigation ‘must look at all the available evidence and reach conclusions based on that evidence.’ Very significantly, it adds ‘The conclusions it reaches may not always accord with the prevailing narrative’.<sup>15</sup>

A good example of a newspaper’s outright refusal to revise its narrative, in light of the report’s findings, came the day after its release in the *Irish Daily Mail*. The paper ran a remarkable item, headed ‘How the *Mail* helped expose story that left nation shocked’. It boasted of how ‘On May 31, 2014, the *Irish Daily Mail* revealed that babies had starved to death while in the care of nuns’ and reproduced, for illustrative purposes, previous *Mail* headlines - one of which declared, ‘Babies who starved to death in Nuns’ care’.<sup>16</sup> On reading the report, however, it becomes obvious that claims of children having ‘starved to death’ must be treated with considerable scepticism and probably arise from a misunderstanding of the term ‘marasmus’ as used in relation to childhood deaths. It seems worthwhile - in this instance - to allow the report, itself, to speak. Chapter 33 explains: ‘The term marasmus as a cause of death was common until the 1940s and was used in instances where a child could not absorb enough nutrients from food to thrive. Marasmus was always associated with an underlying health condition or disease which resulted in a failure to thrive.’ It goes on, then, to specifically caution against misinterpretation, saying, ‘Some commentators have concluded that infant deaths which occurred in mother and baby homes due to marasmus indicates that infants were neglected, not appropriately cared for, and/or willfully starved to death in these institutions. However, marasmus was a frequently cited cause of infant deaths in institutional, hospital and community settings in early twentieth century Ireland. The Commission considers it unlikely that deaths

<sup>15</sup> *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes*, Introduction, p.2

<sup>16</sup> ‘How the *Mail* helped expose story that left nation shocked’, *Irish Daily Mail*, 13th January 2021, p.9

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in hospitals and family homes were due to willful neglect and so cannot conclude that the term marasmus denotes willful neglect in mother and baby homes.<sup>17</sup>

In its Fifth Interim Report, the Commission had similarly advised caution regarding infant remains in the grounds of the former Tuam Home. The 2019 report had stated: 'In the light of a great deal of inaccurate commentary about the Tuam site, the Commission considers it important to emphasise what it has established and what it has not established.' It then explained: 'The human remains found by the Commission are not in a sewage tank but in a second structure with 20 chambers which was built within the decommissioned large sewage tank'.<sup>18</sup> The 2019 report was equally emphatic that the bodies had been "buried" in 'an inappropriate manner' and the distinction it sought to make between actual facts and public perceptions may have been of little comfort to those related to deceased residents of the home or deeply affected by the find. It seemed to recognise, nonetheless, the power of certain versions of the story to distort and inflame the situation and, for these reasons, seemed a point worth making. The distinction was effectively ignored, however, in much of the coverage of Tuam in January past. The *Irish Daily Mail*, for example, persisted in speaking of 'the site containing 796 babies in a sewage tank'.<sup>19</sup> Anxious, meanwhile, to keep the focus on the 'nuns', media outlets appeared to overlook a further significant observation of that interim report: 'All the residents of the Tuam Home were the responsibility of the Galway and Mayo County Councils. It seems to the Commission that responsibility for the burials of deceased children rested with the local authorities and Galway County Council had a particular responsibility as the owner of the institution.'<sup>20</sup>

### ISOLATING 'THE CHURCH'

Their downplaying of local authority responsibilities towards many of the institutions - and of the Commission's criticism of failures to meet these responsibilities - has enabled certain sections of the media to continue to portray 'the Church' as the villain of the piece. The *Irish Daily Mail's* coverage of the release of the

17 The report adds: 'The more likely explanation is that marasmus as a cause of death was cited when an infant failed to thrive due to malabsorption of essential nutrients due to an underlying, undiagnosed medical condition'. See *Final Report*, Chapter 33: Deaths, pp.2-3

18 *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters*, Fifth Interim Report, published 15th March 2019, pp.9-10

19 'I'm amazed, says historian, as the Sisters say they will pay redress', *Irish Daily Mail*, 14th January 2021, p.7

20 *Fifth Interim Report* (2019), p.10



final report began, tellingly, with the sentence ‘The Taoiseach has launched an unflinching criticism of homes run by the Church in the past.’<sup>21</sup> The front-page of the *Irish Daily Star*, that same day, informed readers that ‘The long-awaited report found that 9,000 children died in the institutions and women endured abuse and neglect in the homes run by religious orders.’<sup>22</sup> As always, smaller print - on inside pages - afforded some qualification of these generalizations, but only after initial, misleading impressions had been created. Catholic iconography, meanwhile, dominated the visuals - and not just in tabloid accounts. The *Irish Times* headed its initial coverage with a photo of the Madonna and Child from the grounds of the Dublin Regina Coeli Hostel. It carried inside a further Marian statue, located at the Sean Ross Abbey, in Roscrea, and adorned with the words ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’.<sup>23</sup> One sensed an inference, through these particular choices of imagery, of the Mother and Baby institutions as an inherently Catholic phenomenon - despite the report’s emphasis that this was not historically the case.<sup>24</sup>

Margaret Lee had witnessed not dissimilar attempts, over a decade ago, to isolate Catholic religious - making them the focus for public ire, where the reality was more complex. One politician, for example, had labelled them ‘monsters’ in reaction to the Ryan Report. ‘No interviewer in our Irish media challenged this language’, Lee recalled. ‘Indeed, if anything’, she continued, ‘the interviewers seemed to encourage more hyperbole. No one referred to what these religious had contributed to Irish society despite all the flaws, the petty snobbery, all the failure to live by Christ’s law of love.’ Lee proposed that ‘because we cannot integrate two sides of a situation, our current view of religious is unable to see the good that they have done.’ ‘As time passes’, she concluded, ‘this may change.’<sup>25</sup>

Irish religious have - on the contrary - continued to be denigrated throughout the years since Margaret Lee wrote these words. This merely intensified in the wake of January’s report. The image of a nun sweeping a skeleton under a mat was projected onto the exterior of the former Sean Ross Abbey building for St Brigid’s Day this year. It was part of a taxpayer-funded initiative

21 ‘Our Homes of Shame’, *Irish Daily Mail*, 13th January 2021, p.1

22 ‘Gates of Hell’, *Irish Daily Star*, 13th January 2021, p.1

23 *Irish Times*, 13th January 2021, p.1 & p.4

24 Academic and media analyst, Dr Niall Meehan, has argued that the *Irish Times* appears to down-play both child abuse and institutional abuse when uncovered within Protestant settings in Ireland. See Niall Meehan, ‘Irish Times struggles with non-Catholic abuse’ in the *Village* magazine (Issue 52) February 2017. [www.villagemagazine.ie](http://www.villagemagazine.ie)

25 Margaret Lee, p. 52, Flannery (2009)

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known as the *Herstory* Light Show. The show aimed - according to *Herstory* founder Melanie Lynch - 'to awaken the healing powers of Brigid and the compassion to process the wound of the mother and baby home scandal.'<sup>26</sup> Whatever the likely efficacy of the project, the image seemed wholly pernicious - conveying an impression dangerously at odds with the truth and far removed from the findings of the Commission.<sup>27</sup> The notion, moreover, that the misrepresentation and stigmatization of one group of marginal women could, somehow, contribute to the 'healing' or upbuilding of another shows how seriously unintegrated and imbalanced much of Irish discourse has become. The final report on the Mother and Baby Homes may have been far from perfect. It had the potential, nonetheless, to help redress that imbalance and encourage Irish society, in at least one painful area, to grow towards a more integrated understanding of its past. This makes its repudiation - if not that surprising - seem all the sadder.

26 'Buildings across Ireland lit up in honour of mother and baby home survivors', *Irish Examiner*, 1st February 2021

27 The *Irish Times* used the same image to accompany an article penned by former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, on Friday 5th February 2021. Given the illustration chosen, it seemed especially ironic that the article was entitled 'Only truth telling will close the sad chapter of Mother and Baby Homes'.

**The Centrality of Christ.** Christianity was, for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not so much a religion, but a person – Christ – who made difficult demands on those who followed him. He worried that Christ had become a church matter, not a matter of life, and he saw that the church and real life seemed to be splitting from each other, a division that has almost reached completion in our own time. He would hope that the churches would bring, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, back to form a force in the context of human social existence.

– JOHN F. DEANE, *The Outlaw Christ*, 2020, (Dublin: Columba Books) p. 195.