

I.B. TAURIS

IRELAND and the MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES

A Campaign for Justice



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Foreword by Mari Steed

I've often said that I represent the nexus of what my friend and colleague Dr Jim Smith calls Ireland's 'architecture of containment'. My family embodies the generational legacies of just about every institution and social-control response that the State enforced upon those who didn't quite meet the 'standards' of morality, purity, or whatever was deemed the norm in twentieth-century Ireland.

I was born in 1960 at the Bessboro Mother and Baby Home in Blackrock, Cork to an unmarried mother, Josephine (or Josie, as she preferred). This home, along with two others at Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary and Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath, were run by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, an English-based religious order that came to Ireland even as the nation was birthing itself into political independence. Bessboro opened in 1922, with a capacity for some 140 women and children. The buildings and grounds of all three homes were once Anglo-Irish manor houses bequeathed to the order. And they were but three of more than 100 such homes, institutions, hostels, private nursing homes and individual brokers who orchestrated the placement of children born to unmarried mothers, so-called 'first offenders'.¹ Prior to the passing of Ireland's first adoption legislation in 1952, these placements were considered informal or *ad hoc*: children were boarded-out, fostered, quasi-adopted. The households who took in these children at the time were sometimes paid a stipend by the local county or city government authority. Some parents convinced themselves that these arrangements constituted formal adoptions, and would have the child's name changed by deed poll to their family surname. In other cases, the child was treated as an extra pair of hands on

the farm or in the home, and no formal procedures were taken to alter her/his status within the family.

Before the *Adoption Act, 1952*, the Sacred Heart homes were rife with problems. Historical records show that infant and mother mortality rates in these institutional settings were far in excess (three to five times) that of the national average. Death certificates for children, in particular, list many highly preventable or treatable maladies such as marasmus (malnutrition) or other common early infant ailments which, even in pre-1952 Ireland, were survivable given proper care and medical intervention. There were no trained midwives working in these homes, so mothers laboured (and not infrequently died) under horrendous conditions. After Bessboro was briefly shut down in 1944 by Chief Medical Officer James Deeney, they finally hired a qualified midwife by the name of June Goulding. In the late 1990s June wrote a book detailing these conditions and her own experience over the nine months she served the women at Bessboro.²

It was also during this period (1940-1952) that the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts and other religious orders running these state-licensed institutions discovered that a lucrative market existed abroad, particularly in America, for Irish babies. American servicemen stationed in the UK during and immediately after WWII began hearing stories of children available for adoption and began to make inquiries via the Irish embassy in London and via intermediaries within the network of Catholic clergy. Other American families soon followed suit. Absent any formal legislation, the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs was reluctant (and in some memoranda, outright horrified) to facilitate Irish children being sent abroad to completely unvetted homes. But as the demand increased and after the intervention of the all-powerful Catholic archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, who put in place criteria protecting the religious identity if not quite guaranteeing the health and welfare of the child, the Department of Foreign Affairs were satisfied to look the other way.

My mother, Josie, was born in Co. Wexford in 1933, well over a decade before these children were being banished overseas. She too was the child of an unwed mother, Johanna. Although Mother and Baby Homes were operating at the time, Johanna was sent to the Enniscorthy County Home where Josie was born—the youngest of four non-marital children, and the only one not raised in Johanna’s family. Details of Josie’s early life remain obscure, but it appears that she was sent to St Dominic’s Industrial School managed by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Waterford at an early age. When she turned fourteen, Josie was transferred to a small training centre/sewing room run by the Sisters of Mercy at St Maries of the Isles, Cork, and then transferred on to the Magdalene Laundry sewing room at Sundays Well, Cork. This institution too was run by the Good Shepherd order, and my mother remained there for ten years, doing sewing, until she was released to the care of the Daughters of Charity to work at Our Lady’s Hospital in Crumlin as a ward aide.

My mother, having spent twenty-six years of her life in the care of religious women, no doubt entered society with very little understanding of men or sex. She also lacked the affection of family and friends to nurture her. So, it is hardly surprising that on a rare evening out at a local dance hall, she met my father and became pregnant. Soon thereafter she was sent through another set of revolving institutional doors—first to St Patrick’s Home on the Navan Road, Dublin for a few weeks, then out to a local barrister’s family as holiday help, then on to Ard Mhuire at Dunboyne, a Good Shepherd-run Mother and Baby Home, and finally down to Bessboro near the end of her pregnancy. She suffered from toxemia and mine was a difficult, fraught caesarean delivery at the nearby St Finbarr’s Hospital in Cork. I cannot help but think that had she experienced the same labour just ten years earlier, both she and I would have died.

My mother, with her intimate first-hand experience of the nation’s ‘architecture of containment’, told me many years later that she begged the nuns in Cork to have me adopted by an American family. She knew there were no supports or resources (or societal acceptance)

that would allow her to keep me. Likewise, she knew there was a chance I might not find an adoptive home in Ireland and would simply repeat her own institutional history. So off to the USA I went in December 1961, just shy of my second birthday. I was one of the some two-thousand plus Irish babies to take this life-altering journey.

I was raised in a fairly progressive, comfortable home by Irish-American Catholics in Philadelphia. In fairness, I had a good upbringing and was afforded material comforts, education and opportunities I might not otherwise have enjoyed in Ireland, especially considering the status of my birth. But that all changed when I found myself pregnant at seventeen, as a senior preparing to graduate at a Catholic High School. My adoptive mother was not, unfortunately, progressive enough to handle the ‘shame’ of an out-of-wedlock birth, and despite offers of support from the baby’s father, his parents, and even some of my own adoptive relatives, my mother insisted I be sent to a Catholic-run home in Philadelphia where I too was forced to give my eldest daughter Kerry up for adoption. As it happened, Philadelphia in 1977 was not all that different from Cork in 1960: there were few supports for young women to make independent choices.

Twenty years later, having raised two more children with my husband, and surviving the abusive horror that was our marriage (ending in a murder-suicide attempt which I survived but my husband did not), I felt sufficiently strong to start on the journey to rediscover simultaneously my own roots and my lost daughter. I found Kerry first in 1997, and we joyously reunited and continue to enjoy a close, wonderful relationship. The journey through Ireland’s history and my place therein proved more fraught: obstruction, secrecy and lies greeted me at every turn. I was determined, as I uncovered each new clue, to be open and truthful about what I discovered, which led me to create a website back in 1996, documenting my journey and the history I was attempting to navigate.

One of the first things I learned was that my mother had been in a Magdalene Laundry for ten years. Back in 1996, I had no idea what these institutions were, despite the fact that Philadelphia hosted one of America's first Magdalen societies, operating from 1800 until 1915. But I was already connected to advocates in Ireland on the adoption side, so they were able to bring me up to speed, help me with contacts within the Good Shepherd order to learn more of my mother's history (although, they offered very little), and otherwise fast-track my education on Ireland's dark history of coercive institutions. I learned about vaccine trials that had been conducted in many of these homes, including at Bessboro during the eighteen months I had been resident there. Further investigative work and *Freedom of Information Act* data requests led me to discover that I had actually been a trial subject in a 4-in-1 combination vaccine trial conducted by (then) Burroughs Welcome Foundation (now GSK).

In the midst of this educational tsunami, I found and reunited with my mother Josie, who had married and was living in Swindon in the UK. She was overjoyed and had been waiting patiently for the day I would find her. I became even more determined to share, with her permission and as much as she would allow, her history. I was determined to understand how religious women who had vowed to serve their God and perform acts of mercy, charity, and kindness, could have treated women like my mother or babies like myself so cruelly. I found two equally determined comrades in the form of Angela Newsome, who like me had been adopted, and only much later discovered her own mother had spent nearly her entire adult life between the High Park, Drumcondra and the Donnybrook Magdalene Laundries, and Claire McGettrick, another fellow adopted person with a keen mind and an equally honed sense of justice.

In 2003, just two years after I had first physically reconnected with my mother Josie, the three of us formed Justice for Magdalenes (JFM). For the better part of five or six years, we toiled together collecting and investigating as much history as we could, helping former

Magdalene women, and planting the mustard seed that would eventually become justice. Our work had not gone unnoticed: here in the US, Boston College professor Jim Smith had endeavoured to research and write about the laundries, and in his research, had stumbled upon my website. Originally approaching the topic from an academic standpoint, Jim quickly became a passionate advocate and valuable contributor to our 'Little NGO That Could'.³ We were soon joined by other academics, including the formidable Dr Katherine O'Donnell at University College Dublin and the incredible gift of one of the most brilliant legal minds I have ever had the honour to come across, Dr Maeve O'Rourke.

This little mustard seed soon grew into an incredibly powerful thorn in the Irish government's side in demanding justice for all victims and survivors of the Magdalene Laundries. Throughout the narrative that follows, you will read more about how we walked that road, what we have all learned from the experience, and how it has come to form a meaningful template for real restorative, transitional justice and truth-telling. The illustrious voices captured here grew from that mustard seed as well, because these advocates and activists knew it was important to listen to the voices of the marginalized; to hear our narratives and help us reach a wider platform. To lift us up when we needed it most.

I cannot say enough about my closest colleagues and friends who have walked this path with me. And I am equally grateful to the many other academics, historians, brilliant legal scholars, human rights advocates, allies from the NGO community, and fellow-travellers from all walks of marginalized and oppressed life in Ireland. They have all lifted us up and recognized the fact that without truth, without truth-telling there can be no justice. This is not a story about the 'good holy nuns or priests'; this story is about what survivors and victims endured and continue to endure. And how important it is that our story be affixed to the national narrative. I am proud to know and be associated with all of the individuals who have contributed to this important work.

As a coda to my story, I learned over the last year from my eldest daughter Kerry that sadly, she too, had been forced to place a daughter for adoption in 1993, when she was fifteen years old. She was recently found by her daughter, Kerrie (now twenty-seven), and they have spent the last two years getting to know one another and are enjoying a closeness and healing very similar to what Kerry and I enjoyed over the past two decades. It breaks my heart that even though Kerry and I have always been close, and she is so well aware of our family's generational legacy, and my insistence on truth-telling, that the stigma was still such that she could not bring herself to tell me. I understand that fear, and most certainly do not hold her responsible for it or think any less of her for being unable to share it right away. But it is nevertheless amazing that this generational trauma continues unabated. It is my sincere hope that our past work, this book, and the marvellous works done by other advocates and organizations put an end to it finally.

Notes to Foreward

¹. See *Report of the Commission of the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, Including the Insane Poor*. Dublin: Stationery Office, 1928. 68.

². See June Goulding, *A Light in the Window* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1999).

³. See Mari Steed, 'Justice for Magdalenes: The Little NGO that could', Plenary Address, SNAP Conference, Dublin, 2013. Technically, JFM was not, nor did it see itself as, an NGO.