

BETHANY BABY HOME AND THE *IRISH TIMES*

THE REPORT of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes dominated news coverage recently, especially in the *Irish Times* which has always focused on the treatment of children by the religious, especially Catholic clerics. However, the paper of record stands accused of having a one-sided approach to such abuse. By and large it has refused to investigate serious allegations against homes run by Protestant churches. This may be a defensive reaction on behalf of the newspaper's historic, religious ethos. But the former owners of the *IT*, members of the Walker family, were deeply involved in one such Protestant institution, the Bethany Home, Dublin, which buried at least 262 infants.

Below is a special report on the links between the *Irish Times* and Bethany and also the newspaper's suppression of information on the abuse of Protestant children in the period covered by the commission's report.

The *IT* editorial on the report said, "All of Irish society" should be "ashamed ... The religious who ran these institutions ... maintained a "toxic fiction – Irish moral and religious exceptionalism". Now, it went on, "The secret service has been declassified". The phrase, "secret service" comes from Michael Viney's path-breaking 1964 series of *IT* articles on treatment of unmarried mothers.

The 'secret service' culture was "sustained by an unholy alliance of Church and State", the editorial continued. Readers were encouraged to concentrate on the 'Church' part of the equation, in particular the Roman Catholic Church. *IT* readers appeared to echo their editor. Eleven of 13 lead letters for three days following contained 24 references to that church.

REDRESS

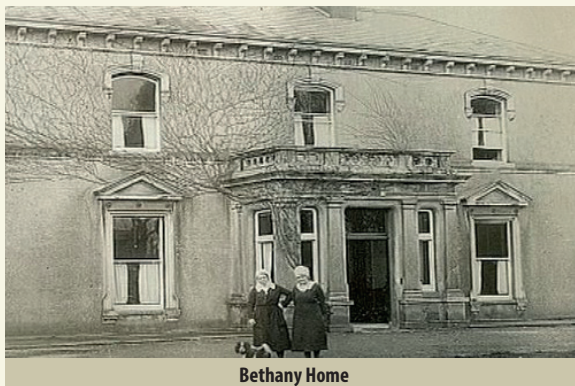
Two letters represented what was actually in the minds of the public, state responsibility and redress. Micheál Martin's Eoghan Harris-inspired, 'society-is-to-blame' apology later that day descended like a lead balloon.

Victims' demand for redress is supported by the commission. Of 15 institutions investigated, three were state-run county homes. A further three, including Tuam, were local authority institutions run by Roman Catholic religious orders. Three more were Protestant. All were regulated and inspected by state officials. Most of the child mortality figure of 9,000, 15% of the total, was indifferently recorded, sometimes not even recorded. State policy and practice aided and abetted the stigmatisation of unmarried mothers and of their 'illegitimate' children.

The *IT* is resuscitating a make-the-Catholic-Church-the-main-patsy narrative. This has also been a ministerial imperative since the early 2000s, so as to steer attention away from official liability. To maintain this lop-sided stance, silence on other factors is required. In this

scenario, Protestant survivors (and those who did not survive) retreat to the shadows.

A recent *IT* profile of Tuam's Catherine Corless, said, "In April 2014, she saw an article ... about an unmarked plot in Dublin's Mount Jerome Cemetery, where children who had died at the city's Bethany home were buried."



Bethany Home

Corless contacted the article's author, Alison O'Reilly, and the rest is, to some extent, the *Irish Times* version of history. But the Tuam deaths were not the first thoroughly recorded.

For some reason, the reader was not told that the oddly described "city's Bethany Home" was a Protestant institution. Nor were they informed how many "children... had died" there. A total of 262 according to the commission's report, most of them between 1937 and 1947.

Dr Niall Meehan, head of Griffith College's Journalism & Media faculty, published research in 2010 listing 219 Bethany children buried in unmarked graves. The findings received coverage at the time, as did the indefatigable efforts of Derek Leinster, former resident and Bethany survivors campaigner. For many years Leinster's attempts to focus attention on Protestant victims was ignored. In April 2014 Leinster organised a memorial stone naming, at

that stage, 222 dead Bethany children. In 2013 Corless was in contact with Meehan, seeking freely given advice on extracting the names of Tuam victims and on a suitable memorial. Members of the Tuam Graveyard Committee were invited to attend the ecumenical service and unveiling of the Bethany monument.

Expired, mainly Protestant, infants were insufficient in 2010 and in April 2014 to force the government to inquire into the running of mother and baby institutions. Later release of Corless's research on the unrecorded Tuam burials did so. A media generated story that hundreds of bodies were deliberately placed in a sewage tank played a large role.

SIMPLY IGNORANT

A difference in the size of the Roman Catholic compared to the Protestant population in southern Ireland, approximately 90 to 5%, gives rise to the mistaken impression that control of 'immoral' unmarried mothers was a uniquely Catholic prejudice and/or that Catholic action was uniquely cruel. In fact cruelty and intolerance, focused on controlling women, features in all religions, especially when reinforced with state support and sanction. The *IT* has concentrated on the Roman Catholic variant of this phenomenon in its news, opinion and editorial columns for many years.

If the *Irish Times* was simply ignorant, an unusual position for a newspaper, it might receive a fool's pardon. But it is not. Besides Meehan's 2010 research, he has continued to write on the subject and to make representations on behalf of Bethany survivors and those of other Protestant-ethos institutions. He has attempted to interest the *IT* in this research, without much success. Opinion articles have been turned down, though the occasional letter was published.

More recently, the *IT* stopped publishing Meehan's letters and refused to say why, though other outlets take them. He has not had anything published in the paper since a two-month-old letter appeared in January 2020. It was published after a Press Ombudsman intervention. Continued censorship risked a ruling against the paper.

Meehan's letter had centred on a mistaken Commission on Child Abuse finding, in the 2009 Ryan report, that 170,000 children were in industrial schools. The correct figure is 40,000. In reporting this the *IT* messed up, publishing two different figures on how many witnesses the commission had interviewed. Intervention by the Press Ombudsman let the paper know that refusal to correct this was unsustainable.

SPECIAL REPORT

However, while the ombudsman focused on the refusal to publish Meehan's correction, its contents on another subject appeared to be the real problem. Meehan's letter noted also other Ryan Report problems, principally failure to discuss physical, emotional and sexual abuse in Protestant-ethos institutions. The latter paid nothing to the Redress Compensation Fund, though the state compensated Protestant victims. Roman Catholic bodies paid €250m. The cost to the State was €1.5bn. Since then Meehan has been unable to interest the paper in his observations.

EXCLUDED LETTERS

After publication of the Mother & Baby Home Commission findings, from 13-21 January, Meehan sent the paper three excluded letters. The first noted an *IT* summary of the Commission's Bethany Home chapter. The paper reported a Bethany matron's view in 1929, that 'illegitimate' children were peculiarly prone to illness and death. Meehan pointed out that the state's deputy chief medical adviser, Dr Winslow Sterling Berry (son of the CoI Bishop of Killaloe), stated this in Bethany in 1939. He contradicted his own colleague, a state inspector who criticised severe Bethany neglect. That information is also in the report.

In a sea of letters mentioning only the Roman Catholic Church, it might have been important to note that. The paper evidently disagreed.

Meehan's second letter corrected a major error. Under its reporter's byline the paper wrote, "President Michael D Higgins has said the state and Catholic Church" were responsible for violating the rights "of women and children in the mother and baby homes." The president never mentioned the Catholic Church. He put most emphasis on state responsibility. His reference to church and state included all churches.

President Higgins' information office thanked Meehan for notifying the *Irish Times*. The *IT* ignored him but, soon after, the mistake appeared online after the newspaper foolishly repeated the error in print. Meehan sent reasoned and polite letters to the editor on failure to publish; they were ignored also. He decided instead on a wake-up call. On 19 January, he sent the editor a PDF letter with the word 'complaint' prominently displayed.

Implicitly, another Press Ombudsman intervention was on the cards. That day the online report was quietly corrected. On 20 January in print, an unobtrusive correction appeared on the op-ed page.

Meehan's second letter also explained to the *Irish Times* why it was prone to such errors. He reminded the paper that it published only letters criticising the Roman Catholic Church, whereas his letters detailed state responsibility for Bethany Home death and neglect. He cited the seminal September 1964 Michael Viney *Irish Times* articles on treatment of unmarried mothers, praised in its January 13th editorial. Meehan noted that at Bethany Home's 42nd annual meeting in 1965, Katherine Glover, the matron, said Viney's 1964 articles "dealt primarily with the Roman Catholic population".

Viney had referred just once to the Church of Ireland using what Viney termed two "confidential" mother and baby institutions. Meehan asked why their names should be confidential when Roman Catholic institutions were named. It was odd, since the *Irish Times* had reported every year for 40 years Bethany's efforts on behalf of what it termed "unwanted" babies.

Viney later noted that his articles "became a text for [UCD] sociology students", limited previously to "a syllabus set by papal encyclicals". He said the articles brought "Catholic affairs and institutions into the *Irish Times*". In other words, unmarried motherhood was a "Catholic affair" in "Catholic ... institutions".

Meehan has also attempted to persuade the *Irish Times* of its special responsibility. It goes beyond the paper's consistent exposure of the perfidy and hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic



Niall Meehan



Catherine Corless

Church, to the exclusion of such behaviour by the Church of Ireland.

Viney, it will be remembered, used the term 'secret service' to describe those controlling the lives of unmarried mothers. One such operative was *Irish Times* chairman from 1959-73, Ralph Walker. He was the nephew of Hettie Walker, Bethany Home Residential Secretary from 1922-55.

DYSFUNCTIONAL

Prior to legalised adoption, Ralph Walker, a senior partner in Hayes and Sons, wrote informal Bethany Home 'adoption agreements'. One saw Derek Leinster consigned to a dysfunctional family in Wicklow that abandoned him, illiterate and uncared for, to surrounding farms and fields.

An especially interesting example concerned a 23-year-old mother called Emily Sheppy. In her 1951 'agreement', Ralph Walker represented himself as Emily's 'attorney'. It stipulated that the proposed adoptive parents "bring [Emily's daughter] up a Protestant", in this case Presbyterian. Extraordinarily, they could at any stage 'transfer the custody and management' of the child to a third party of their choice. The hapless and penniless Emily was threatened with costs of £26 a year and "all additional expenses", should she change her mind about the 'agreement'.

Her change of mind was a real fear, especially three years later when adoption became legal and Emily's consent was required.

A lie that Emily was uncontactable was officially recorded.

Emily's daughter, Joyce McSharry, was continually told Emily had died of TB and was not in the Bethany Home. Joyce was allegedly rescued by a social worker. For that reason Joyce was never inclined to seek Emily. Emily died aged 48 in 1976, lonely and alone. Her few treasured possessions included photographs of the baby that her 'attorney', Ralph Walker and others had persuaded her to give up. The lies and deceit devastated Joyce when she found out, not least as it was continually impressed on her that a central tent of her religion was to be always truthful.

References to Ralph's father, Joseph (unnamed), are in the Commission report. Bethany Home was cash-strapped in the mid to late 1930s, at a time of rapidly increasing child mortality. That was because, as the report explains, in an unavoidable move to new premises in 1935 the owner, Joseph Walker, demanded £3,000. An independent analysis valued the property at £2,000. Joseph had Bethany Home over a barrel, but eventually agreed to £2,750. He had been on Bethany's management committee. Sensibly, at that point he resigned.

REGULATED

Meehan and Leinster wrote to Hayes and Sons in 2009, 2011 and 2014 to inquire after records of Bethany human beings whose lives Walker regulated. No such files existed, they were told.

Meehan's third excluded letter contained elements from the first. It remarked on an *IT* report mentioning the new Department of Health's medical Adviser, James Deeney in the mid-1940s. Due to high infant mortality amounting to neglect, Deeney removed a head nun who ran Bessborough mother and baby institution. Meehan's 2015 submission to the Mother and Baby Home Commission contrasted Deeney's actions with those of Winslow Sterling Berry in 1939. Deeney did something to avert children dying, whereas Sterling Berry did the opposite.

Berry also argued that public fuss about death and neglect about Bethany would go away if it stopped admitting and trying to convert Roman Catholics. He forced them to stop. It was direct evidence of sectarian regulation, to the detriment of the health and wellbeing of mothers and children. Public controversy about Bethany in 1939 caused death to decline in 1940. As Berry predicted attention went away and mortality rates rose to their highest point in 1944. That was when Deeney in his new Department of Health position became aware of death in Bessborough.

Irish Times readers might have been interested in that.

That returns us to the shame on Irish society that the *Irish Times* endorsed on 13 January. The question is, how much rubs off on the newspaper. The paper will doubtless consider at some point whether Roman Catholic Religious orders and (perhaps also) Protestant churches should again contribute to a redress fund. Given its view that society is to blame the paper might recommend a societal contribution, from the *Irish Times* itself.