Sarah-Anne Buckley and John Cunningham, “Remembering and forgetting: The Tuam Mother and Baby Home and the Irish Revolution”.


On Sunday morning, 10 April 1932, twenty members of the IRA marched from Tuam’s Market Square to the old workhouse building on the Dublin Rd, a distance of about half-a-mile. On arrival, they were greeted by matron, Mother Hortense¹, and several others of the Bon Secours congregation, which had operated a Mother and Baby home in the building during the previous six years. The IRA men were commemorating six of their comrades who had been shot in the same workhouse by Free State forces in April 1923, in the final weeks of the Irish Civil War. Leading the marchers was Tom Maguire, recently a member of the Dáil (Irish parliament), whose younger brother Seán had been among those shot. Mother Hortense led her visitors to the place of execution, which they were pleased to see had been ‘kept … in perfect preservation’ by her. Next, all went to the institution’s chapel, where a decade of the rosary was recited for ‘those soldiers of the IRA killed in action and executed’, with Maguire placing a laurel wreath on the altar steps. Before their departure Mother Hortense gave permission to a deputation of the marchers to erect a small monument at the site of the executions, ‘bearing the names of the dead heroes.’²

¹ Mother Hortense was known as Sister Hortense in the early part of her career, but the ‘Mother’ designation will be used throughout this article.
² *Tuam Herald*, 16 April 1932. Some of the detail from *The Connacht Tribune* of the same date.
The encounter resonates today, not least because of the positioning of two monuments less than a hundred metres from one another on the site of the former workhouse in Tuam.

One, erected in 1985, commemorates the six executed rebels and Mother Hortense, connecting her, a pillar of the new order in Ireland, with Tom Maguire, a life-long revolutionary republican. The other, of very recent provenance, remembers the deceased infant inmates of the Mother and Baby Home. Linked by proximity and by the different legacies of Mother Hortense, the monuments and the events they commemorate prompt questions about relationships between Catholicism and Irish nationalism during and after the revolutionary period; notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy in Irish society, and ‘historical accountability’ in regard to burial and commemoration.

**Taking charge: Sister Hortense and Tom Maguire**

Born in 1889, Mother Hortense was christened Helena McNamara (shortened to Lena in her family) and was raised in a thatched farmhouse at Fossa
Beg, Scariff, Co. Clare. Her parents were industrious, and evidently ambitious for their children. In 1908, nineteen-year-old Helena entered the Bon Secours novitiate in Cork and she made her first profession of vows in Paris in January 1911.\(^3\) Her congregation originated in France, where it was known for its medical care of the genteel, and this was also this section of society to which the Bon Secours sisters ministered in Ireland on their arrival in the 1860s. This, however, was very far from the case with the congregation’s initial mission in North Galway.\(^4\)

Tom Maguire was born in 1892 in Cross, near Cong, Co. Mayo. His father was a carpenter, who worked in the family carriage-making business, as would Tom. Joining the Volunteers on their formation in 1913, he was not given the opportunity to participate in the Rising of 1916, but he felt exhilarated when news of it reached him in Cross. By the time of the conscription crisis in 1918, he held officer rank in the movement, and with the reorganisation of September 1920, he became officer commanding for South Mayo.\(^5\) In that role, he was sternly opposed to the contemporaneous social and land agitation, regarding those involved as ‘greedy and selfish, taking advantage of a situation.’\(^6\) In 1921, Tom was wounded while leading the celebrated Tourmakeady ambush.\(^7\) Subsequently, convalescing and in hiding, he was nominated to contest the 1921 general election, and returned unopposed. His profile attracted attention, but he managed to avoid arrest, though punishment was directed at his family in persistent raids by Crown forces. In the last such raid before the Truce of July 1921, the family home was demolished.\(^8\) Taking the anti-Treaty side in the Civil war, Tom became General Officer Commanding of the 2nd Western Division of the IRA, with the rank of Commandant General.

As Tom Maguire’s stature grew throughout the west of Ireland, Mother Hortense was also taking on important responsibilities. In December 1921, she was appointed matron of a

\(^3\) Communication from Brid Cottrell (Bon Secours Sisters) to John Cunningham, 29 August 2018; 1901 census documents, Fossabeg, Co. Clare; ‘Rev. Mother Hortense, Bon Secours Sisters’, Tuam Herald, 10 August 1963.

\(^4\) Cork Examiner, 26 March 1867. See also ‘The Infirmary Sisters; or, Sœurs Du Bon Secours’, The Irish Monthly, vol. 8, no. 87 (1880), 492-6; Belfast Newsletter, 14 March 1859, and Freemans Journal, 8 July 1865.


\(^6\) Ibid., p. 281.


\(^8\) MacEoin, Survivors, pp. 284-8.
new children’s home in Glenamaddy. The home was established as part of a reconfiguration of social services throughout the county, which is discussed below. When the Glenamaddy children’s home was relocated to Tuam in 1925, Mother Hortense and the Bon Secours sisters moved with it. She remained in charge in Tuam until 1952, when she was transferred to Cobh.

‘... no great acquisition to the community’: Refashioning the Welfare System

The building in which the April 1932 encounter took place had opened as part of the Poor Law system in 1846, a few years after most Irish workhouses. Built on a six acre site to accommodate up to 800 ‘paupers’, it followed the general plan for such facilities. In 1890, the Sisters of Mercy were invited to take over nursing duties at the workhouse, reflecting a general incursion into the system during the previous decades by Catholic religious orders, spearheaded by Catholic Poor Law Guardians. In this instance, the Sisters struck a hard bargain, rejecting the quarters initially offered them because of their proximity to a ‘cesspool’, and insisting that a new house be built for them on the grounds. The development extended an already substantial ‘ecclesiastical quarter’ in the town, which would be celebrated in the *Irish Rosary*:

Tuam Cathedral stands a little to the north-east of the Market Square in which is erected the celebrated Cross of Tuam. It is surrounded by the new College of St Jarlath, the old College, the old Archiepiscopal Palace, the Presentation Convent, with its day schools and boarding school, and Mercy Convent also, with its day schools, and boarding school, and Mercy House, the Christian Brothers school and residence, and the new Archiepiscopal Palace. A little further away towards the south is the workhouse, the hospital attached to which is in charge of the Sisters of Mercy. The Cathedral stands appropriately in their midst as the mother of them all.

It was a considerable list, which illustrates how extensive was the reach of the Catholic Church into the public education and welfare sectors even before the revolutionary period. Tuam

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10 Maria Luddy, “‘Angels of mercy’: nuns as workhouse nurses, 1861–98”, in Jones and Malcolm, *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland 1650-1940*, pp. 102-20. The Sisters had a former association with the workhouse, as unofficial teachers of girl inmates. They withdrew from the institution in 1860, however, on the appointment of a schoolmistress by the Board of Guardians (‘Local Reports’, *Tuam Herald*, 14 January 1860).
11 *Tuam Herald*, ‘30 August 1890, 14 January 1891.
12 Quoted in *Tuam Herald*, 6 December 1919.
itself was a place in decline, whose population fell under 3000 in the early twentieth century, and where the palaces of the ‘ecclesiastical quarter’ overlooked slums and shanty settlements. The impressions of visitors were rarely positive: for one, it was ‘a poor town of which the staple trade is religion’ for another, it was a place with ‘two cathedrals and no barber.’\textsuperscript{13}

With declining demand for its pauper accommodation – especially after the introduction of Old Age Pensions in 1909 – there was much contemporary discussion about the rationalisation of the poor law system. A Viceregal Commission on Poor Law Reform reported in 1906, while Myles Keaven, a veteran officer of several Galway Boards of Guardians, suggested a major reconfiguration as early as 1904, arguing that Co. Galway required only two workhouses.\textsuperscript{14} All the others, he suggested, might be put to other purposes: one handed over ‘to the Protestants of Connaught’, and one each to Catholic male and female religious orders. The remaining buildings, he argued, should ‘be turned into factories’. Regarding those to be given over to the Catholic religious, they might be used as follows:

The house going to the Christian Brothers would principally be for children taken from the workhouses at a certain age, say seven years, and all others in want throughout the county. The one given to the sisters would be for fallen women, 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.\textsuperscript{15}

If there were many such rhetorical interventions during the first two decades of the twentieth century, there was little actual change. With one minor exception, the opportunities for reform and consolidation provided by the Local Government Act of 1898 were not taken up by Boards of Guardians in any part of Ireland and the system continued to stagnate.\textsuperscript{16} In the immediate aftermath of the 1916 Rising, a special committee of Galway County Council and the ten Poor Law Unions of the county adopted a scheme which was quite similar to the earlier Keaven proposal.\textsuperscript{17} It was not taken any further. But larger changes loomed and,

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Tuam Herald}, 12 October 1918. The letter was originally published in 1904.
\textsuperscript{16} Donnacha Seán Lucey, “‘These Schemes Will Win for Themselves the Confidence of the People’: Irish Independence, Poor Law Reform and Hospital Provision”, \textit{Medical History}, 58.1 (2014) 46-66 at 48-50. Only the Castlecomer Union had availed of the facility in the legislation to separate hospital care from the poor law.
\textsuperscript{17} James P. Murray, \textit{Galway: a Medico-Social History}, Galway: Kenny’s Bookshop and Gallery, 1994, p. 80
increasingly, from the cabinet of the revolutionary Dáil down, members of the rising Sinn Féin movement virulently denounced the poor law system. William Cosgrave, the Dáil’s local government minister from April 1919, was an advocate of radical change in the system but evidently was not sympathetic to those who had relied upon it. In May 1921, he stated in the Dáil:

People reared in workhouses ... are no great acquisition to the community, and they have no ideas whatsoever of civic responsibilities. As a rule their highest aim is to live at the expense of the ratepayer. Consequently it would be a decided gain if they all decide to emigrate.\(^\text{18}\)

Under the emerging order the ratepayers’ interest loomed large in such discussions, just as it had in the old. It was not until the local elections of mid-1920 that Sinn Féin had the political boots on the ground to act in relation to the Poor Law. By recognising Dáil authority in the way that they did, however, the various councils deprived themselves of Local Government Board funding, meaning they already accepted that any innovation would have to be done on a shoestring.\(^\text{19}\) These were the circumstances in September 1921, when Galway County Council adopted and set about implementing a scheme of institutional reform even more far-reaching than those discussed previously. All workhouses in the county were to be closed, the Galway facility to be a Central Hospital serving the whole county, Loughrea to be a County Home for the ‘indigent’ and ‘infirm’, Clifden and Ballinasloe to be district hospitals. One of the vacant workhouses was to be set aside for orphaned/abandoned/neglected children and unmarried mothers.\(^\text{20}\)

Already the county’s workhouse had been disrupted by the War of Independence, their under-utilised facilities put to new uses by both sides. A Sinn Féin court sat in the Tuam workhouse, and, in early September 1920, British soldiers occupied the male section of the building, necessitating the removal of paupers to other centres.\(^\text{21}\) The British military remained until January 1922.\(^\text{22}\) About 70 Free State soldiers took possession on 26 July 1922,

\(^{21}\) Tuam Herald, 11 September, 18 December 1920.
\(^{22}\) Connacht Tribune, 28 January 1922.
three weeks after the commencement of the Civil War. There would be several attacks on the building by republican ‘irregulars’ in the following months.23

In remote Glenamaddy, twenty miles from Tuam, the Bon Secours sisters were not unaffected by broader developments. Having arrived in the village in 1903 to take over nursing duties at the workhouse under the direction of Kildare woman, Sister Basil Harbourne, they were soon seen to have greatly improved the condition of their charges.24 Four sisters were present in the House on census night 1911, when they had responsibility for only 82 patients and paupers. A dramatic interruption of routine came in mid-1921, when the local IRA paid a visit. Over thirty years later, Martin Ryan, the officer in charge of the operation described what happened:

In June 1921, I took charge of the burning of Glenamaddy workhouse. As far as I remember, it was an order from G.H.Q. and it was intended to prevent the occupation of the building by British forces... I placed armed parties of shotgun men at all approaches to the village to protect the party carrying out the actual burning. It was a big operation for which I drew on about 40 Volunteers ... eight men from each company selected by the company captain in each case. The workhouse buildings covered a big area and all were burned with the exception of the hospital and the fever hospital. Paupers, some of them cripples, had to be moved from the hospital, where rearrangements were necessary to find accommodation for them. Fortunately for us, we had the help of the Bon Secours Sisters, under whose charge the hospital was, and of Fr Fergus, now Most Rev Dr Fergus, Bishop of Achonry. The Master of the Workhouse also assisted. We had to cut the roof of the Workhouse to save the Chapel from the flames. The nuns and Fr. Fergus remarked favourably on the discipline and efficiency of the Volunteers.25

Most of the details of Ryan’s account were consistent with the contemporary report of the night’s ‘startling operations’ in the Connacht Tribune, though remarks attributed to the workhouse master did not give the impression that he ‘assisted’ with anything.26 An account by Bishop Fergus, also written several decades afterwards, suggests that any ‘help’ from him

23 Connacht Tribune, 29 July, 30 September 1922; Tuam Herald, 11 November 1922.
24 Western People, 18 June 1904.T
26 Connacht Tribune, 16 July 1921.
to the incendiaryists was given under duress: ‘I tried to persuade the officer in charge that, in my opinion, the action was unnecessary, but it was of no avail; the order had been given and had to be obeyed.’

It may be surmised that any cooperation which was forthcoming from the Sisters in the burning of the building in which they worked was likewise not entirely voluntary, and mainly directed at saving the workhouse chapel.

Elsewhere in Ireland, members of the small Bon Secours congregation were taking a particular interest in the consolation and the spiritual welfare of republican prisoners. In Cork prison, they ministered to hunger strikers, including the so-called ‘boy prisoner’, 17-year-old Joseph Murphy, who died on 25 October 1920. On the night of 13 March 1921, six members of the congregation spent some hours in Mountjoy with six young men who would be hanged on the following morning. One of them, Thomas Whelan of Clifden, recorded ‘how strangely affected he had become’ as a result of the encounter with the sisters.

It seems that Mother Hortense did not arrive in Glenamaddy until December 1921, when she took charge of the children’s home announced by Galway County Council. She was 32. As a young sister, it is quite likely (though not possible to confirm) that she was involved in her congregation’s prison visitation work prior to that. Either way, she must have been affected by its particular mission to republican prisoners.

‘... a wonderful country for producing heroes’: The Tuam martyrs and their remembrance

The six commemorated at the Tuam workhouse in 1932 were among the last of 77 republican prisoners officially executed by the Free State in reprisal for the activity of anti-Treatyite ‘irregular’ forces during the Civil War. Considered outrageous, even by prominent supporters of the Treaty, the executions resonated in the community, and affected political attitudes through the decades since. Illustrating the point, a local woman born in 1923 told a historian in 2010: ‘The other thing was that you couldn’t vote for a party [Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael] who put six men up against the wall and shot them.’

Of the six, five were part of a contingent surprised by Free State forces in Cluide, halfway between Tuam and Headford, on the morning of 19 February 1923. All were taken to Galway jail, where they remained until 10 April. On 8 April, in an attempted inversion of the Cluide engagement, the imprisoned men’s comrades had launched a surprise early morning attack on Free State forces occupying a bank building in Headford. They were beaten back, but two Free State soldiers wounded in the engagement died in the following days. The execution of the six prisoners was evidently a reprisal for the Headford attack, but the disproportionality of the response may have been influenced by testimony at the inquest of Private Thomas Lyons (from the doctor who failed to save him) that the fatal bullet had possibly been laced with poison. As for the reason for the trouble taken to move the prisoners for execution to Tuam, it has been suggested that it was connected with the death of the Bishop of Galway on 9 April. A further consideration would have been the powerful impact of locating the executions in an area where several of the men were well-known and where the anti-Treaty IRA remained active. Following a perfunctory court martial, all were convicted of possessing a rifle and ammunition ‘without proper authority’, and sentenced to death. Two Tuam priests were summoned to pray with the condemned men, and a Mass was arranged for the morning of their execution at which two of them acted as altar servers.

Some sense of what followed was provided by a local newspaper: ‘About eight o’clock, a.m., two volleys were heard, and it is stated that the condemned men were taken out in parties of three each, and blindfolded, and their hands joined as in prayers.’

Biographical detail of the executed six will provide insights into the movement they served. A tendency noted of other places for those from better-off families to hold higher ranks, is not contradicted by this small sample. Commandant Frank Cunnane (23), was the highest ranking. One of thirteen children of schoolteachers from Kilcoona, near Headford, his parents were ‘advanced’ nationalists, who had joined a Gaelic League protest by returning their 1911 census form in Irish. One sister was a Mercy nun in Tuam. Volunteer Martin

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32 Connacht Tribune, 14 April 1923.
33 Ó Gadhra, Civil War in Connacht, pp. 82-3.
34 ‘Six executions in Tuam’, Tuam Herald, 14 April 1923.
35 ‘Executed’, Connacht Tribune, 14 April 1923.
37 1911 Census, Kilcoona; ‘Reaction of Local Councils’, Eleven Galway Martyrs
Moylan (24), grew up on a small farm at Farmerstown (otherwise Cloonleenaun), near Annaghdown, the youngest of seven children of widow Honor Moylan. Two of his brothers, immigrants in New Zealand, had served in His Majesty’s forces during the First World War.38 A comrade of Moylan’s in the Annaghdown Volunteers, Mickey Monaghan (22), was the seventh of nine children of a poor farming family of Clooneen, near Headford. To console his relatives, he wrote on the eve of his execution: ‘We sang a few songs here tonight, M. Moylan, Jim O’Malley and myself, so you can see we are not downhearted.’39 Volunteer Séamus O’Malley (25), grew up in Oughterard, the third of six children of a farming family, which was in poor enough circumstances in 1911. A Gaelic Leaguer since boyhood, a precocious activist of the cooperative movement, and an enthusiastic sportsman, O’Malley fled to England during the War of Independence, but was captured and jailed. Having agonised about the Treaty, he decided to oppose it.40 Lieutenant Seán Newell (32), was the fifth of six children of Honor and Michael Newell, a herdsman in the townland of Kilmurry, close to Headford, in 1911, where the family lived in reasonable circumstances.41 Also a lieutenant, Seán Maguire (19) was the youngest of the six, and brother of Tom Maguire, a far more senior (and culpable) figure in the movement. Under sentence of death at the time, Tom later hypothesised that he was spared because he was a member of Dáil Éireann, and that Seán was selected in order to bring him grief.42

Following the executions, the authorities took care to assure the public that the initial burial place of the six in the Tuam workhouse grounds was ‘consecrated’. Given the close attendance of Catholic clergy, there is no reason to doubt this. At the following meeting of the Tuam District Council, nonetheless, there was support for a proposal that the remains be handed over to relatives so that they might ‘at least get the consolation of getting the bodies’.43 Ahead of the withdrawal of troops from the Tuam workhouse, the remains were reinterred in the Custume Barracks in Athlone, provoking widespread outrage. On the proposal of Councillor Alice Cashel, the following resolution was adopted by the Galway Hospital Committee, ‘That we view with horror the desecration of our dead by the

38 1901 and 1911 Census, Cloonleenaun; Christine Moylan Sutherland, Invercargill, personal communication.
39 1911 Census, Clooneen; ‘Last letter of Mickey Monaghan’, Eleven Galway Martyrs.
40 ‘The late Mr. S. O’Maille’, Connacht Tribune, 28 April 1923.
41 1901 and 1911 Census, Kilmurry.
disinterment and removal of patriotic Irishmen from their graves in Tuam.44 Others who protested included the priests who had attended the men in the hours before death.45

The Free State responded to public feeling throughout the country, greatly heightened by outrage at the Tuam exhumations, by deciding to hand over to their next-of-kin the remains of those executed while in its custody during the Civil War.46 On 28 October 1924, the 77 bodies were exhumed in 13 different places (the largest number, 20, being in Athlone) and given over to the custody of their families. The remains of the Tuam six, together with five comrades from the Second Western Division of the Anti-Treaty IRA were taken west. Nine travelled in cortege to the church in Headford, passing through a very sombre Tuam on the way. There they rested, until six priests concelebrated a funeral service on the morning of Thursday 30 October. Thousands gathered in Headford, a significant number having marched from the Maguires’ native Cross, before proceeding to Donaghpatrick cemetery.47 Among the speakers at the graveside, representing Sinn Fein, was Dr Kathleen Lynn. She consoled the bereaved as follows:

It is not a day really for sadness, but of great joy. They would never forget the joy there had been in Ireland over such heroes as lay in that grave today. Those boys, not more than twenty-four years of age bravely faced their death for the freedom of Ireland. It was not for an incomplete freedom that they died for... Surely in the history of the world, there never a day like today when seventy-seven men who died for freedom had been buried. Ireland was a wonderful countries for producing heroes. There would be pilgrimages to those graves for all generations, and they would never be forgotten.48

There would indeed be ‘pilgrimages’ to the graves. Commencing at Easter 1926, there were annual commemorations at the ‘republican plot’ in Donaghpatrick, with clerical and political participation.49 Complications would arise from the break-up of the anti-Treaty ‘family’ with the establishment of Fianna Fáil in 1926, though these took time to manifest themselves. Tom

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44 ‘Bodies Disinterred’, Connacht Tribune, 16 August 1924
45 ‘Bodies of Irregulars Exhumed: Alleged Desecration’, Connaught Telegraph. See also ‘Protest of Tuam Town Commissioners’, and ‘Protest from Spiddal’ in Connacht Tribune, 16 August 1924. There were similar protests about contemporaneous exhumations elsewhere in the state.
46 Murphy, ‘The Government’s execution policy’, pp. 244-77.
47 Connaught Telegraph, 1 November 1924.
48 ‘Laid to rest’, Connacht Tribune, 8 November 1924.
49 Connacht Tribune, 27 March 1926.
Maguire, the principal custodian of the republican plot, was one of those not reconciled to the Free State, remaining a revolutionary republican. A member of the Second Dáil of 1921 (the last to be elected on an All-Ireland basis), he continued to regard that assembly as the last legitimately elected Irish parliament. In the view of irredentist republicans, he and the six other ‘faithful’ members of the Second Dáil were the lawfully-constituted government of Ireland when they voted to hand over their authority to the IRA Army Council in 1938. Tom held to this view of governmental legitimacy until his death in 1993. For the previous thirty years, as the last surviving member of the Second Dáil, he had enjoyed iconic status among a section of republicans – through splits in 1970 and again in 1986.

The division of 1926 was copper-fastened by De Valera’s ban on the IRA in 1936, and rendered very acrimonious by republican prison deaths during the ‘Emergency’ of 1939-45. Tony D’Arcy, from a republican family in the Headford area, died on hunger-strike in Mountjoy prison in 1940, and was buried in Donaghpatrick amidst scenes reminiscent of those of 1924.¹⁰¹ Twelve years later, D’Arcy’s name was inscribed along with the others on the striking republican monument unveiled by Tom Maguire in the presence of 650 people at Donaghpatrick. Six priests offered prayers, and there were TDs from Fianna Fáil and Clann na Talmhan in attendance.¹¹¹ Evidently, the 1923 executions still resonated powerfully enough to overcome any reservations that politicians from mainstream parties may have felt about attending an event organised and marshalled by revolutionary republicans, including members of the illegal IRA.

In Tuam, the other site of memory, there is a record of Old IRA men mobilising at the workhouse gate in 1934, two years after the encounter between Tom Maguite and Mother Hortense, and marching from there to mass for ‘the eternal repose of the souls of who had died in defence of the republic.’¹²¹ Behind the gates, Mother Hortense did what she could to remember the sacrifice of the six. According to a tradition in her community, she was distressed when she first visited the workhouse to see footprints on the outside of the workhouse chapel, believing these to have been left by the executed men. According to the same source:

⁵⁰ Connacht Tribune, 20 April 1940.
⁵¹ Tuam Herald, 23 August 1952.
⁵² Tuam Herald, 17 November 1934
The memory of the shooting was always in her mind... Mother Hortense arranged to have the site blessed and cemented and placed a wooden crucifix on the site of the executions. She later had a glass protection erected around the crucifix. Prayers were offered continually by Mother Hortense and her Community for the souls of ‘The Six’ and Mass was celebrated annually on the site in their memory.\(^5^3\)

Mother Hortense left Tuam in 1952, but the preservation of her monument became a matter of concern in 1961 on the closure of the children’s home, when the county manager assured councillors that ‘provision would be made for its removal and re-erection.’\(^5^4\)

‘Why trouble about past events?’

In 1947, marking the Famine centenary, the Old Tuam Society raised a monument in the workhouse burial ground. The ceremony was conducted by the Catholic Archbishop, Joseph Walsh, who stated:

Some have said, ‘Why trouble about past events, and people who are so long dead?’...

We ought not forget that those who died during the Famine were our brothers, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and destined for a place in Heaven. It may be that some of them are even yet undergoing their purification in Purgatory, for remember the period of purgation may be very long in some cases. This day and this memorial will urge us in our charity to offer a prayer for our departed brethren who need our help.\(^5^5\)

One might wonder why similar consideration was not given to the ‘departed brethren’ who had occupied the same building in more recent decades. Between 1925 and the date of Archbishop Walsh’s speech, 679 children and infants had already died in the institution.

**A ‘ramshackle habitat’: the Glenamaddy Children’s Home**

The November 1921 decision to locate the new Children’s Home in Glenamaddy, made by the Executive Committee on Union Amalgamation in Galway, was recorded as follows:

It was decided to place the children’s home in charge of the Bon Secours Sisters at a flat rate of 10s per head per week ... and providing that the use of the whole of the

\(^{5^3}\) Communication from Bríd Cottrell (Bon Secours Sisters) to John Cunningham, 29 August 2018.

\(^{5^4}\) Tuam Herald, 11 November 1961.

\(^{5^5}\) Tuam Herald, 20 December 1947.
premises within the workhouse walls be given to the community for the purpose of 
the children’s home at a nominal yearly rent for which term the community may be 
retained by the executive in charge of the children’s home, the committee to be 
responsible for outside repairs. The necessary medical care of the Home will be 
provided by the executive committee.\textsuperscript{56}

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 retrievement of unmarried mothers’. With regard 
to the type of unmarried mothers that would be ‘retrieved’, it restricted these to ‘first 
offenders’.\textsuperscript{57} While the contractual arrangements and expectations may have been clear, 
when Mother 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. An inspection of 1922 found a variety of 
hazards:

- **Baths and Water Closet** – Additional baths should be provided, and also some water 
closets. The dry earth closet there should be closed.
- **Kitchen** – The drain passing under the kitchen ... is an open trap into which all kitchen 
  waste is thrown. A wooden cover is placed over it to prevent any person falling into it. 
  ... The apertures (doors and windows) in the wall at the other side of the staircase and 
  opening into the burned building are dangerous and should be closed to prevent 
  accidents.\textsuperscript{58}

There was a cess-pit which was ‘rather too near’ the building, but the committee did ‘not 
recommend for reasons of economy that it be taken further away’.\textsuperscript{59}

The tone of reports and commentary in the *Connacht Tribune* on the ‘ramshackle 
habitat’ in Glenamaddy grew ever more alarming.\textsuperscript{60} In June 1924, in a decisive intervention, 
the paper published an investigation of the conditions endured in the Home by ‘the waifs and

\textsuperscript{56} *Connacht Tribune*, 19 November 1921.
\textsuperscript{57} GC5/2, Galway County Council, 1922.
\textsuperscript{58} *Connacht Tribune*, 18 November 1922.
\textsuperscript{59} *Connacht Tribune*, 18 November 1922.
\textsuperscript{60} *Connacht Tribune*, 21 June 1924. See also ibid., 17 February 1923.
strays, the orphans and the abandoned, the nameless little ones of the county’, and by those who cared for them. The writer continued:

Upstairs in the rambling house ... there are thirty-three babies... One day these little mites, if they survive the rigours of life in such a house, will be projected into life. They will have to start with a heavy handicap. That handicap should be lessened as much as it is humanly possible.61

The Medical Officer of the Glenamaddy Home, Dr O’Malley, certified it as ‘at present in an insanitary condition and detrimental to the health of the officers’.62 Of the alternatives, the former workhouses in Tuam and Portumna, the Tribune’s anonymous ‘Special Correspondent’ recommended the former, on the basis of its good transport links.63 There were powerful voices in Tuam opposed to the move, on the grounds that the workhouse would make a suitable factory building. The opponents included for a period Archbishop Gilmartin. However, rather than see the facility relocated outside his own bailiwick when Glenamaddy became indefensible, the Archbishop became an advocate for Tuam.64 Even after the decision was taken to relocate, however, the military continued to occupy the Tuam workhouse building, notwithstanding the exhumations of August 1924 and letters of protest from the Board of Health and the Bons Secours sisters.65

Eventually, the sisters took over the Tuam premises on 11 May 1925. At that time, there were 87 infants and children (up to the age of 9 years) in their care, and 26 mothers. On 2 June 1925, the children travelled the eighteen mile journey in three ambulances and a motor car.66 The army having only recently evacuated the building, conditions were little better than Glenamaddy. In August 1925, the Galway Board of Health received a letter from Sister Euphemia, Bon Secours Superioress in Dublin, in which she threatened to withdraw her Sisters from Tuam: ‘it is impossible for the sisters to carry on as things are, and after five months of drudgery, trying to save the lives of small children, they feel their responsibility too

61 Connacht Tribune, 21 June 1924.
62 GC5/3, Galway County Council, 1924.
64 Connacht Tribune, 9 May, 3 October 1925.
65 GC5/3, Galway County Council, 1924.
66 Ibid.
keen to continue’.\(^{67}\) Three months later, in October 1925, the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor made similar points:

It was arranged that the Board of Health put the Home in order, but ... this had not been done, and signs of dilapidation and decay were painfully evident. Its continuance in the condition in which we saw it would be a grave injustice to the Sisters and militate very much against its usefulness for the purpose to which it has been allocated.\(^{68}\)

An official opening of the Tuam Children’s Home took place in 1927, at which point there were 30 mothers and 118 children – 96 of whom were classed as ‘illegitimate’.

‘... the advantages of being brought up under the care of nursing Sisters’

In December 2012, Catherine Corless first published her research on the Tuam Mother and Baby home in the *Journal of the Old Tuam Society*. Her article, entitled ‘The Home’, did not get attention outside Co. Galway, so, after collecting the death certificates for the 796 children who died between 1925 and 1961, she contacted a reporter from *The Irish Daily Mail*. The front page story that followed would receive widespread attention internationally and nationally.\(^{69}\) From that moment, Tuam became a site for remembrance, anger and investigation. In 2015, the Mother and Baby Homes Commission was set up.\(^{70}\) Its final report is due in Spring 2019. Already, historians, journalists and survivors have written of Tuam and other homes such as Bessboro, Castlepollard and Roscrea in Cork City.\(^{71}\) Limits on access to

\(^{67}\) Letter dated 21/9/25, GCS/3, Galway County Council.

\(^{68}\) GCS/3, Galway County Council, 1925.


\(^{71}\) For a discussion of the homes and the development of child welfare see Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and
Bons Secours records has placed restrictions on research for this chapter. The authors have, however, been able to draw on the death certificates of the children who died while in the Home, on the minutes of the Galway Board of Health, and available minutes from the Homes and Home Assistance Committee. We have drawn extensively on newspaper coverage. In regard to the question of whether these children and infants were buried in a septic tank, in March 2017, an interim report from the Commission stated:

The Commission has completed its test excavation of the Tuam site... One structure appears to be a large sewage containment system or septic tank that had been decommissioned and filled with rubble and debris and then covered with top soil. The second structure is a long structure which is divided into 20 chambers ... significant quantities of human remains have been discovered in at least 17 of the 20 underground chambers which were examined ... The Commission is shocked by this discovery and is continuing its investigation into who was responsible for the disposal of human remains in this way.

So 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’. There are class complications surrounding this terminology, which we need to tease out further but there were also 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 Co. Galway, as well as some children from Co Clare. Strikingly, the homes of several of the mothers were close to those of the executed ‘boys’ of 1923, in places including Kilcoona and Corrandulla, indicating that they attended the same schools, and perhaps sat in same classes as Frank Cunnane and Martin Moylan.

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

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72 For access to all death certificates see www.IrishGenealogy.ie.
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.\footnote{Ibid.} 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 Homes 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. In another case in 1924, a married woman, destitute with a one-year-old child, applied to enter the Home. They were admitted when it was established she had been deserted by her husband. In 1923, a nine year old boy was transferred to Cabra School for the Deaf from the Children’s Home – there were other similar cases.

Significantly, there are examples in the records of adoptions, long before adoption was legalised in 1952. In July 1924 for example, the adoption of EG by a woman in Connemara 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.\footnote{GC5/3, Galway County Council, 1924.} The boarding-out system itself was first introduced under the Irish Poor Law Amendment Act (1862) which 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.\footnote{Virginia Crossman, ‘Cribbed, Contained and Confined? The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law’, \textit{Éire-Ireland}, 44, 1&2, Spring/Summer 2009, pp.37-61.} For example, annual returns demonstrate that the total number of children boarded out in 1900 stood at 2,223 of whom 849 had been boarded out by Boards of Guardians in Leinster, compared to just 99 in Connacht.\footnote{Ibid.} Yet the Galway returns show an increase after 1900. In 1917, for example, in the Glenamaddy Union there were 18 children boarded out, all ‘satisfactory’ bar one and seven...
children hired out. In November 1922, the Galway Board of Health and Public Assistance stated that boys aged 6 and over could be boarded out but ‘they see no reason why they should be removed from the Bon Secours nuns’. In October 1924, the Board stated that children would be kept until 9 years for girls and 7 years for boys. Throughout the early years there are references to the Board ignoring circulars from the C.G.D., stating: ‘The board strongly disapprove of the boarding-out of children until they reach the age of 7 years as regards boys and 9 years as regards girls. Children maintained in the home ... have the advantages of being brought up under the care of nursing Sisters, their health properly attended to, well clothed and fed and sent to school regularly.’

‘... the smell and shine of Cardinal red polish... long lines of potties’

There are a number of memoirs and accounts of life in the Home. These include articles by the late journalist John Cunningham who spent some time there after the death of his mother. As he acknowledged himself, Cunningham’s experience was unusual, because his father was employed in the Home:

One has to be careful of any impressions gained in childhood, though memories of The Children’s Home can be extraordinarily vivid – long passageways in ‘The Home’ dominated by the smell and shine of Cardinal red polish on the floors, long lines of potties, of the inexplicably large numbers of young women, and the mysterious business of the arrival and departure of the same young women, and apparently endless numbers of babies and toddlers.’

Not typical either, but poignant and quite remarkable, was the account of life in the Home by Julia Carter (later Devaney), one of those who made the journey from Glenamaddy to Tuam in June 1925, and who remained in the Home until its closure in 1961. Against the odds, she subsequently married a man that she had first encountered as a handyman in the Home. By her own account, published in the Tuam Herald, she herself was always ‘a square peg in a round hole’. She recalled: ‘It never dawned on us that the nuns were wronging us or that we were entitled to our own lives.’ Of the mothers who passed through the Home during her 35 years there, she recalled:

77 NOTE
79 David Burke, ‘A Voice from the Tuam Home’ Part 1, Tuam Herald, 30 December 2015
The women had to have an admission ticket from the doctor to get in. There was no such thing as being signed in, but once they were there they would have to wait a year to look after their baby. One girl escaped, but she was brought back in again that night by the Guards. The gates were never locked as there were always milk vans and bread vans coming in... The mothers spoke only to each other about the fathers of their children. They’d hate to face home... An odd fellow would come in and take the girl out and marry her. I remember one case where the parents and the priest and the fella came in and he said he would marry the girl, but he would not take the child as it was not his.\textsuperscript{80}

For the inmates, the boarding out system terminated friendships without warning:

Olive, I was very fond of in particular. She was boarded out. I lost touch with her. We never knew where they went, you wouldn’t dare enquire after them. The nuns never kept in contact with the children. The Loughrea ambulance come, and they would be marched up into it.\textsuperscript{81}

Emotional connections such as that between Julia and Olive were not considered when decisions about their futures were being determined. Spanning her childhood in Glenamaddy and three decades of her working life in Tuam, Julia’s association with ‘the Home’ was probably the longest of all, giving a particular value to her reflections on the conditions of the children there:

The children had a language all of their own. They didn’t talk right at all, nobody to teach them. When the children came home from school, they got their dinner, and then their hair was fine-combed for nits and fleas... Whatever they learned at school, they learned nothing up there: eating, to sitting on the pot, to going to bed. I think they spent most of their young lives sitting on them pots.\textsuperscript{82}

Those who saw the children outside the Home similarly remarked on an ‘otherness’.\textsuperscript{83} For Tuam songwriter, Padraig Stevens, the daily parade to school of the ‘Home Babies’, which he witnessed as a teenager, was an ‘alien spectacle’:

... Two by two. Pale faces, snotty noses.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
Little kids, their scabby heads shorn.
No socks, no smiles, no chatter.
The only sound a scraping, and clattering...
Holding hands and walking briskly
Looking straight ahead...\(^{84}\)

‘... any infant born in any other circumstances appears to have a better chance of life’

On the very salient question of infant mortality, as the Mother and Baby Home Commission has recorded on foot of the pioneering work of Catherine Corless, 796 children died in the home during its 36 years, averaging 22.2 deaths per year but ranging from one in 1958 to 53 in 1947. Among the 796 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 Sisters were seemingly held in high regard in Tuam, with Mother Hortense patronising local charities, and perennially winning prizes in her own name for the produce of her institution’s garden.\(^{85}\) A private hospital established by the congregation in the town in 1946 was very successful, and continued in operation for almost four decades after the Mother and Baby closed its gates.\(^{86}\)

In the Home’s operational period, the matter of infant and childhood mortality was raised on occasion, but generally not treated as a matter of urgent concern. In 1928, for example, during a debate at a meeting of the Galway Homes and Home Assistance Committee, Dr Thomas Bodkin Costello, the medical doctor to the Children’s Home, responded to a query by stating ‘that half the children born in all countries die before the age of 5 years’, to which the Committee secretary added: ‘the deaths in the Children’s Home would not be 50 per cent’.\(^{87}\) One who had a very different perspective was Alice Litster,

\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 1
\(^{85}\) Re Tuam Show, see for example Tuam Herald, 31 August 1946, 24 September 1949, 23 September 1950
\(^{86}\) ‘Archbishop opens new hospital’, Tuam Herald, 17 August 1946.
\(^{87}\) GCS/6, Galway County Council, 1928.
Inspector for Boarded Out Children in the Department of Local Government and Public Health, who wrote as follows in 1939 in the *Report on Unmarried Mothers in Ireland*:

The chance of survival of an illegitimate infant born in the slums and placed with a foster-mother in the slums a few days after birth is greater than that of an infant born in one of our special homes for unmarried mothers ... In theory, the advantage should lie on the side of the child institutionally born. Pre-natal care, proper diet, fresh air, sufficient exercise, no arduous work, proper and comfortable clothing, freedom from worry, the services of a skilled doctor, the supervision and attention of a qualified nurse, all should be available and should make for the health of the expectant mother and the birth and survival of a healthy infant... Cleanliness, medical attention, dietetic knowledge, all the human skill may continue to preserve child life should be at hand. Yet any infant born in any other circumstances appears to have a better chance of life. I have grave doubts of the wisdom of continuing to urge Boards of Health and Public Assistance to send patients to the special homes so long as no attempt is made to explore the causes of the abnormally high death rate. The illegitimacy birth rate shows an upward trend. In 1916 it was 1530; in 1925 it was 1662. We cannot prevent the birth of these infants. *We should be able to prevent their death.* [Authors’ emphasis] 88

An estimate for the number illegitimate births in Co. Galway given to the Homes and Home Assistance Committee in 1928 was 25 a year, which was so far below the national average as to raise a considerable doubt about its accuracy. 89 Looking at other debates surrounding the home in its early years, cost, ability to pay, and class were central to discourse. In May 1926, Mother Hortense was asked by the Galway Board of Health how many unmarried mothers had been reared in a workhouse; boarded out; or reared in an industrial school before they entered the home. The question demonstrates the mentality of the Board at that time with regard to these women. In August 1926, there began discussions about the need for a maternity ward for unmarried mothers, ‘as the admission of this class of patients to the

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89 GCS/6, Galway County Council, 1928.
Maternity Department of the Central Hospital tends to prevent respectable patients from seeking admission thereto’.  

In 1928, the Committee debated whether the cost of £26 per year for a child and the same for a mother was too much to pay the Bon Secours order. On the responsibility to care for these women and children, the chairman stated:

This is really the parents’ responsibility and not ours. There must be cases where the betrayers of these unmarried mothers are well-to-do, and they should not be a burden on the rates. I think we should look into every case and send those girls back to their parents who can afford to keep them.

A similar concern had been expressed in April 1924, when the County Solicitor reported that he would ‘take necessary legal action against the putative fathers and all illegitimate children born in the State since 1 January 1922 at present maintained in any of the institutions under the Board’s control.’ In May of the same year it was decided that in order to obtain a decree against putative fathers of illegitimate children there must be some corroboration of the mother’s evidence, and ‘that proceedings should be taken at first in the strongest cases.’ Members of the Homes and Homes Assistance Committee were appointed to accompany the solicitor to the Glenmaddy Home with a view to getting the necessary statement. In January 1925 the first civil bills against fathers had been pursued in Galway and in Clare. [This was an approach that had precedents in the workhouse era, with fathers having been pursued since 1862. Proposing the prosecution of a putative father in 1919, members of the Tuam Board of Guardians remarked: ‘It is right to put down blackguardism; there is too much of it going on the county.’ In 1920, the Guardians referred a case of disputed paternity to the local Republican Court.]

**Remembering**

On Sunday 21 April 1985, Tom Maguire unveiled a substantial monument on the remnant of the workhouse wall against which his brother and the others of the six had been shot almost exactly 62 years earlier. It was the culmination of efforts dating back to the early 1970s. A

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90 GC5/4, Galway County Council, 1926.
91 GC5/6, Galway County Council, 1928.
92 GC5/4, Galway County Council, 1926.
smaller monument raised many years earlier by Mother Hortense was retained. Principal speaker was the former Sinn Féin president, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, who had been ousted from his position in 1983. Because of the party’s decision to take its seats in Leinster House it was a time of ferment in the party and the Tuam ceremony was, in substantial part, a rallying point for the faction associated with Ó Brádaigh which would become crystallise as the Republican Sinn Féin party in 1986. This was noted at the time, with Ó Brádaigh’s party being accused by a Fianna Fáil figure of ‘taking over the whole thing completely’94. The local controversy did not prevent the participation of the Bon Secours sisters, with Sister Kieran placing a wreath to the ‘memory of Mother Hortense and the other sisters who devoted their lives to caring for mothers and their children’.

The monument, dedicated to the ‘six members of Óglaigh na hÉireann who were executed on this spot’, named the six and their comrades shot in Athlone, but there was one other name: ‘This memorial is also dedicated to the memory of Mother Hortense McNamara of the Bon Secours Sisters who ensured the preservation of this site’. The name of Mother Hortense also featured in commemorative booklet issued on the day, which highlighted a

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94 Tuam Herald, 20 April 1985
donation made years before towards the monument by ‘Three Girls who wish to remain anonymous’:

I and my friends hope that you and your committee will accept our small donation. It is in honour of Mother Hortense, a great nun who raised us with love and understanding. We remember seeing the names outside of the Chapel of the Six brave men, who were executed at the Tuam workhouse. We hope you succeed in erecting a memorial for those men. We are very grateful that you and the people of Tuam have not forgotten Mother Hortense. She will live forever in our memory. We hope that, by now, she is in Heaven, enjoying the fruits of her labour. God bless and God love you all for remembering Mother Hortense.95

By contrast with the executed ‘boys’ of 1923, to whom robust memorials were unveiled in 1952 and 1985, commemoration of the 796 infants and children who died in the Mother and Baby home is at an early stage. Prompted by Catherine Corless work, a small monument was erected in 2015 on the wall of the institution, across a children’s playground from the republican monument. Since 2014, Tuam has become a site of pilgrimage for many survivors of abuse and those angered at their mistreatment. In August 2018, in response to Pope Frances’ visit to Ireland, over 1000 marched silently from the town of Tuam to a vigil at the site, following the route of previous marchers mentioned above. As women and men held up the names of those 796 infants who died in the institution from 1925 to 1961, it became apparent that their story will remain of critical importance to future generations.

Conclusion: Who Do We Commemorate?
The names of those executed 11 April 1923 resonated through the decades in the locality. This was so even as the remains of hundreds of children mouldered unacknowledged very close to the place of their execution. Care was taken of the bodies of the six – even their sworn enemies ensured that they were placed in ‘consecrated ground’ – and they were reinterred twice so that they might find a fitting final resting place. On two sites their sacrifice was dutifully commemorated. Coincidentally, the Bon Secours Sisters who died while based in the Tuam Home were also reinterred twice – once in 1961 on the closure of the Home, and again

95 Mother Hortense McNamara, Eleven Galway Martyrs
four decades later when the Sisters closed their private hospital in the town. This was all appropriate, and consistent with the strictures of the Archbishop of Tuam in 1947 in relation to the Tuam workhouse casualties of the Great Famine: that commemoration and a marked burial place were positive mechanisms, which ‘urge us in our charity to offer a prayer for our departed brethren who need our help’. Why then did the congregation which went to exceptional lengths to honour the memory of ‘martyrs’ of 1923 and which was properly conscientious in its respect for the remains of deceased Sisters, seemingly show such scant regard for the bodies of the orphaned and ‘neglected’ children placed in its care? Was this common practice in the institutions of Ireland, many of whom dealt with mothers and infants viewed as outside the norms of respectability? Did the question of their burial and reinterment emerge throughout the decades? Without access to the Bons Secours records this is not a question can be answered. Whether the Commission can do so remains to be seen, but what is certain is that during this ‘decade of centenaries’, who we chose to commemorate, memorialise and remember should continue to be challenged and explored. Historians have a key role in historical abuse enquiries, and in pushing for historical accountability and historical justice – be that in the investigation of those in institutions, those fostered or those within their own homes.