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Title	Institutionalised for poverty: women's rights and child welfare in the Ireland, 1922-1996
Author(s)	Buckley, Sarah-Anne
Publication Date	2016-05-27
Publication Information	Buckley, Sarah-Anne. (2016). Institutionalised for poverty: women's rights and child welfare in the Ireland, 1922-1996. Jacobin.
Publisher	Jacobin
Link to publisher's version	https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/catholic-church-ireland-magdalene-laundries-mother-baby-homes/
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/7191

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The Catholic Cure for Poverty, *Jacobin*

Dr Sarah-Anne Buckley

Catherine Corless, a retired secretary turned amateur historian, worked tirelessly in early 2014 to get local officials, newspapers, and radio stations in Tuam, Ireland to care about her discovery.

Nearly eight hundred infants and children died in the town's mother and baby home between 1925 and 1961, yet none, Corless revealed, received a proper burial. Burial records for the deaths seemed not to exist, leading Corless to the conclusion that many of the babies were likely buried in the home's unused septic tank.

Corless's persistence in demanding recognition of the deaths eventually paid off; international media outlets picked up the story that, while initially ignored in Ireland, shocked readers elsewhere and eventually garnered attention in the country.

While stories of young boys finding skeletons on the school's grounds were deeply disturbing, behind them lay an even more tragic story — Ireland's long history of imprisoning women and children in industrial schools, reformatories, mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries, and psychiatric facilities. How did Ireland become a country where institutionalization was the preferred response to poverty, "immorality," and other social ills?

The Catholic Church is often held up as the primary culprit, but it is not the only guilty party in this story. It acted in partnership with the state and elites, creating an institutional nexus that rejected social-democratic solutions to poverty and pushed back against women's liberation. Instead, the effects of poverty became transformed into moral issues to be solved by institutionalization — a process that undergirded Ireland's carceral state and profoundly impacted the treatment of women and children in the country.

A System Is Born

Women's organizations and struggles played a central role in the Irish revolutionary period. The women workers' union led strikes for better conditions; the suffrage campaign threatened established gender roles and demanded a new role for women in the Irish Free State; discussions of sexuality emerged from the suffrage and labor press; and issues of sex work and venereal disease were politicized by feminists and nationalists.

Yet many of the hopes of this period were dashed. Politically, socially, and economically, the 1920s and '30s were full of setbacks: censorship was introduced, legal divorce was abolished, women were banned from sitting on juries, the civil service marriage bar was introduced along with quotas for women working in industry, and contraceptives were banned. The radical women of the revolution — like many of their male counterparts — disappeared from public life or were silenced.

These developments were coupled with the criminalization of women and children, particularly unmarried mothers who were shepherded by the thousands into Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes. The laundries were a nineteenth-century institution that evolved from a place of temporary respite for women — albeit imbued with moralistic and penitent

structures — to a carceral institution in independent Ireland. Women worked within them under terrible conditions for no pay, some remaining for short periods, others for their entire lives.

The last laundry closed in 1996, and an apology was finally issued by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2013. But to this day, most women formerly imprisoned in the laundries have been denied redress, and after years of unpaid, forced labor, face poverty in old age.

The mother and baby homes were a separate institution that emerged in 1922 during the Irish Free State, and were officially endorsed by the Church and state authorities in 1927 as a solution to illegitimacy. Unwed pregnant women were consigned to the homes to give birth and were required to work in the home for two years afterward, unless they had money to leave.

Their children were usually adopted illegally from the homes, and as historian Michael Dwyer has demonstrated, some babies were even used for medical testing by universities and pharmaceutical companies. One company, Wellcome, conducted vaccine trials from 1930 to 1977 in children's institutions in Dublin, Cork, and Tipperary that were sanctioned and overseen by state-salaried medical officers and academics.

Women's supposed "immorality" was a welcome red herring, distracting from the realities of poverty, unemployment, poor housing, and high infant mortality. In debates on the state provision of a social safety net, women were depicted as "blackmailers" and "temptresses," and while the married mother was revered in popular culture, the unwed mother was deemed "illegitimate." Oliver St John Gogarty summed up the situation well in 1928, declaring to the senate: "it is high time that the people of this country find some other way of loving God than by hating women."

Ireland's 1937 Constitution reflected the increasing power of the Catholic Church and exacerbated the situation for Irish women. The Church's hierarchy was recognized as having a "special position" in guarding the faith, and was heavily involved in constitutional deliberations. Archbishop John McQuaid's submissions, in particular, heavily influenced the articles that discussed the relationship between "religion, church and state."

The new constitution privileged the family, giving primary responsibility for care and social reproduction to the women in them. The document also enshrined a conservative morality that protected marriage "against attack," prevented women from occupations "unsuited to their sex," and emphasized the importance of a "life within the home." Gendered legislation also cemented the inequality women experienced in education, pay, welfare, marital status, and domestic violence, as well as their continued lack of reproductive rights.

It wasn't just the Catholic Church and the state that perpetuated anti-women policies. An archipelago of oppression that included the medical profession, the courts, the police, politicians, social workers, religious orders, families, and voluntary organizations all reinforced the structural inequality of Irish women.

Unsurprisingly in this atmosphere, the provision of birth control was driven underground, and legal cases highlighting the short leash of moral rectitude littered the press and court reports. Reproductive rights were consistently framed as a moral rather than medical issue, and from 1935 to 1978, contraceptives were banned in Ireland, leaving women to rely on the importation of illegal contraceptives and back-alley abortions.

Women's groups and activists pushed back against the regressive legislation, and in 1937 were active opposing the reference in the constitution to the special position of women within the home. But they were up against a powerful coalition between the state, the medical profession, and the Catholic hierarchy.

A rare moment of contestation highlights this alliance: in 1951 progressive doctor Noel Browne attempted to introduce the Mother and Child Scheme, guaranteeing free health care to mothers and children under sixteen. The Church responded by rallying against "socialised medicine," the transfer of responsibilities from the family to the state, and used fears over reproductive control to ultimately defeat the plan.

Activism by feminist groups continued and events like the 1970 "contraceptive train" from Belfast to Dublin raised awareness leading to the eventual legalization of birth control, but women's right to safe, legal abortion continues to be curtailed in Ireland.

The Children of Ireland

Endorsers of the 1916 Easter Rising often point to the line in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic about "cherishing all the children of the nation equally" as an example of a progressive path not followed. But the line was actually a reference to all Irish citizens, and was primarily concerned with appeasing unionists, not protecting the vulnerable.

Indeed, the Proclamation contained no guarantees that the problem of poverty would be interpreted as an economic one and instead used the language of morality — "cherishing" — and a fluid, adjustable concept of equality, both of which could be adapted to Catholic social views.

In contrast, the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil in 1919 stated "no child shall suffer hunger or cold, from lack of food, clothing, or shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of a Free and Gaelic Ireland." Independent Ireland fell short of these ideals.

As historian Conor McCabe argues, the first Free State government after the civil war implemented a program of financial austerity and avoided government intervention. Between 1924 and 1927, income tax was cut by 40 percent while subsidies for the construction of public housing were removed from local authorities and given to private contractors instead.

Minister for Industry and Commerce Patrick McGilligan's 1924 address to the Dáil illustrated the stark reality: "There are certain limited funds at our disposal," he said. "People may have to die in this country and they may have to die through starvation." By 1926 the infant mortality rate had reached 12 percent.

Over time, the state's resources expanded, but children in poverty and in state care were neither "cherished" nor "provided for," and policing families took precedence over providing a social safety net. Child neglect was the primary offence investigated by public inspectors, but the notion of neglect itself was an empty vessel. Poverty, desertion, alcoholism, illegitimacy, mental illness, and spousal abuse were all included under its umbrella — an ever-expanding category that manifested fears about changes in family life.

In Ireland, these concerns were evident in the shifting focus from physical to moral neglect in the 1930s. Fueled by a carceral turn facilitated by both the Catholic Church and the state, the shift to a moral framework resulted in thousands of children being sent to industrial schools, and many more being subjected to the invasion of their homes by uniformed inspectors who ignored their parents' pleas for help.

The industrial school system — a nineteenth-century British construction endorsed by successive Irish governments until the late twentieth century — was one of a cluster of institutions, along with reformatories and borstals (youth detention centers), kept in place to deal with perceived social problems.

The principal reason given for the removal of children to industrial schools was that families were too poor to care for their children, but the language used to describe removal conveys a clear class prejudice. Common complaints in the files recorded by inspectors were that parents were “lazy,” “dirty,” “unfit,” “useless,” “indifferent,” or of “doubtful morals.”

The carceral turn in Ireland would prove lasting. While Britain and most other countries in the advanced capitalist world had made moves toward developing a welfare state to deal with poverty by the 1920s, in Ireland the Church and state retained control of families through the continued and expanded use of institutions.

This occurred despite the clear fact that institutionalization was far from the cheapest option for elites. In the 1930s, the average payment to a family for home assistance was nearly half that of a capitation grant for a child in an industrial school. But the other alternatives — universal social welfare, single mothers allowance, legal adoption, nurseries, fostering, and more generally, the legalization of contraceptives and abortion — clashed wildly with the prerogatives of the Irish Catholic Church–state nexus.

Welfare would remain in the private sphere of family, church, and charity. Maintaining a structure of “charity” as opposed to one of social welfare set Ireland apart internationally, particularly in the interwar years, and enabled the Church and state authorities to retain an enormous amount of control, particularly over the social reproduction of labor, much of which was performed by forced labor in Ireland's carceral institutions.

In this way, Catholic social teaching spread beyond the control of “undesirable” families and facilitated the creation of an unpaid workforce that underpinned Irish capitalism.

By 1924, there were more children in industrial schools in the Irish Free State than there were in all of the industrial schools in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland combined. The system was abolished in England in 1933, but in Ireland, particularly following the suppression of the 1935 *Carrigan Report*, the reformatory system continued for decades.

The Carrigan committee was tasked with investigating the “moral state” of the country, but on viewing the committee's findings the Department of Justice decided to conceal the report. According to an internal memo, the report “was unbalanced to be too severe on men, while overlooking the shortcomings of women in these matters, and the, at times, highly coloured imaginations of children.”

But as the Carrigan committee revealed, abuse was rampant in Irish institutions, and was strongly determined by class and status. Jim Beresford, a former resident of the Daingean

Industrial School, put it this way: “What eventually stopped them abusing me was that I had parents, and I was articulate. Most of the other children were inarticulate and illiterate because they had spent their whole life in the institution.” Beresford managed to escape and his sister immediately put him on the boat to England where he remained, a fugitive at fifteen years old.

Many others were less fortunate. In 1939, twin girls born to a single mother in Cork were placed in Clonakilty Industrial School. One of the girls, Annie, remembers beatings, bed-wetting, and humiliation. With regard to her education she states: “The classroom was a place of punishment. It was where we watched people being sadistically beaten. If we were ambitious to study, they did not like that.”

Annie’s story has much in common with testimony from other former industrial school residents — fear, starvation, cold, sexual and physical abuse, humiliation, and degradation. So overwhelming and specific are the details that it has become impossible for these testimonies to be dismissed as figments of “the highly coloured imaginations of children.”

Changing Times

Small, left-wing outlets like the *Workers’ Voice*, the organ of the Irish Communist Party, made calls to investigate Artane and other institutional facilities as early as 1935, but it wasn’t until the late 1960s that queries began to appear in mainstream venues like the *Irish Times*.

In 1969, a leading psychiatrist stated, with regard to the Kennedy Commission and Ireland’s industrial schools,

We must go back to the roots. Can our present services give children adequate care? If not let us scrap them. Let us not say we have an institution and we must keep it. The children must not be there to serve the agencies. I am told “you are attacking the clergy.” I am not attacking any clergy, but if there is a defect in the system I will attack it.

This statement, alluding to the conditions experienced by children from deprived backgrounds, and the long-term effects of poverty and institutionalization, was long in coming. It was echoed by Michael Viney, a journalist in the *Irish Times*, who wrote articles highlighting the treatment of young offenders.

His description of the children’s court is particularly insightful:

The children’s court in Dublin is a disarming chamber of justice, functional and mellow as an old village schoolroom, with a turf fire burning in the grate. Nobody wears uniform and there is no dock for the accused. But a mere appearance in this court allots a child his role in a formal drama. Up to now his relationships with the adult world have been fluid, malleable and fairly spontaneous.

Now all the players, including him, take up a ritualised position. The policeman accuses him of wrong and refrains from comment . . . The probation officer contributes a brief Greek chorus on his home and school background. His mother, somewhat diminished by the setting offers her defense “He’s a good boy at home” or rejection “I can’t do a thing with him”. What the boy himself may say is expressed in the non-committal formulas “I dunno sir”. Only the justice seems free to improvise — but even he is tied, eventually, to ritualised alternatives of justice.

But while the 1960s marked a period of growing awareness of the deleterious effects of Ireland's carceral institutions and softening control by the Church, it wasn't until the 1990s that these issues really became national scandals. Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan's 1999 book, *Suffer the Little Children*, exposed Ireland's class-based carceral system in a way that few other commentators dared — "that thousands of children were detained in a State-funded system essentially because their parents were poor."

Over the past fifteen years, following the *Ryan Report*, the *Murphy Report*, and the *McAleese Report*, important strides have been made in highlighting abuses in the Irish state care system. But the issues of class, access to resources, and reactionary views of women that underpinned them have usually remained outside of the mainstream discourse.

The unwillingness to recognize the central role of class, poverty, and sexism in policing Irish families obscures the connection of past abuses to present ones. The state's relationship to Ireland's Travelling community is illustrative. Here again the extraordinary poverty of Travellers has been cast as a cultural and moral issue — eliding the need for state social services, jobs programs, and anti-discriminatory legislation.

Similarly, Ireland's direct provision system, where asylum seekers are kept often for years in deplorable conditions without the right to work, is an ongoing scandal. Across the country, 4,300 people, including 1,600 children, live in thirty-four accommodation centers — run by private contractors who receive about €50 million in annual state funding. It's not surprising that the conditions have begun to draw comparisons with the Magdalene Laundries.

The Irish state has complete control over asylum seekers' lives. Women and children live in cramped hotel rooms, with no facilities to cook and clean or for children to play, and a weekly allowance of €19.10 per adult and €15 per child (recently increased from €9.60) must cover school books, medications, self-care items, and other basic needs. Mental health issues are five times higher among asylum seekers than in the general population, and many refugees have been trapped in limbo for seven years or more waiting for approval or deportation.

The solution to these deplorable situations is clear, but will only come about through a political transformation that brings an end to austerity, introduces a fair and progressive taxation system, manages social problems through well-funded public services rather than privatization, and creates a society that respects and supports women and children.

As long as social problems continue to be warped into moral panics and foisted onto individuals, these hopes will remain distant.