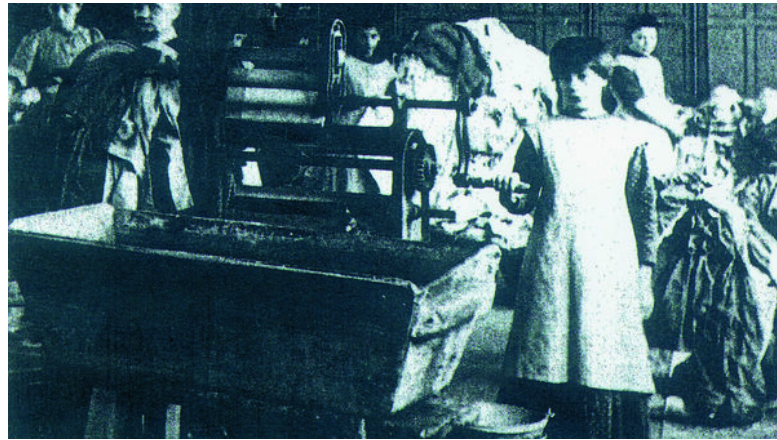


## Clodagh Finn: Why is 'survivor' still the hardest word in our unfinished democracy?

We are not short of evidence of how State, Church, and society were complicit in a culture of silence and fear, writes Clodagh Finn




Kathy O'Beirne in a Magdalene Laundry in 1910

WED, 08 JUN, 2022 - 07:30



### Clodagh Finn

 I READ Claire Keegan's magnificent book *Small Things Like These* in a single sitting.

It was named Irish Novel of the Year at Listowel Writers' Week last week and you are unlikely to find a more evocative or tender study of life in the cold, closed Ireland of 1985. Yet you'll also find hope and deep humanity in the raw chill of one late November in New Ross, Co Wexford.

It is not giving too much away to say that the book tells the story of Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant who goes against the prevailing wisdom to stand up for a new mother who is interned in a Catholic institution.

It is a literary reminder of the kind of real-life courage celebrated in Galway recently when Ena McEntee and Patricia Burke Brogan were awarded the freedom of that city for offering "a small glimmer of hope to those who were otherwise possessed of none at the time", to quote Galway mayor Colette Connolly.

There's a film to be made of how Ms McEntee, who worked in the city's Magdalene laundry, sprang at least 15 women from the institution when she saw the conditions there. Meanwhile, Ms Burke Brogan exposed the inhumane conditions in those places of horror in her award-winning play, *Eclipsed*.

We are not short of evidence of how State, Church, and society were complicit in a culture of silence, and fear, that destroyed the lives of tens of thousands of women; normalised forced family separation; excused shockingly high infant mortality; turned a blind eye to illegal adoption, and allowed systematic violence, torture, and rape.

Neither are we short of occasions to bring it back into the public consciousness. In the last three weeks alone, there has been a literary award, a civic award, and the launch of another book that, despite all, highlights the staggering lack of political progress in making real redress.

The latter, titled *Redress: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice* (edited by Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke, and James M Smith), was launched in late May in Collins Barracks in Dublin where artist Alison Lowry's exhibition *(A)Dressing Our Hidden Truths* features an installation of nine glass christening robes spread across two rooms. It is described as "a profound piece of commentary on the Tuam Mother and Baby Home revelations" where local historian Catherine Corless found evidence that 796 babies were buried in a septic tank.

A haunting photograph from the exhibition features on the book's cover, a reminder that we are still waiting, eight years later, for those dishonoured souls to be exhumed from a mass grave.

The book itself is a collection of essays focusing on what democracy might look like if you put different facts and different voices to the fore.

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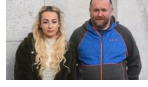

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Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman persists in calling it a ground-breaking piece of legislation. It is not; it is following in the same deep groove of secrecy that keeps many archives out of reach. Picture: Gareth Chaney/Collins

Voices such as Magdalene laundry and industrial school survivor Mary Smith, who hands me a CD of a song she wrote for the mother she never met. The words that jump out are: "Hear my voice."

Or Sheila O'Byrne, whose personal experiences in a mother and baby institution — I refuse to call them homes — are laid out in a series of poems which she shows me as Redress is launched.

Or Felix O'Neill, a man who spent years in an industrial school before being boarded out in west Kerry and running away. He didn't learn to read and write until he was 30 but then went on to become a collector and restorer of rare books.

He also blogs about the lasting and continuing hurt inflicted on him and many others. Of his 40-plus contemporaries at one industrial school, just two are still alive. He is 68.

"They are waiting for us all to die," says Mr O'Neill.

If there's a unifying thread in those snatched snippets of book launch conversation, it is the importance of telling the world what happened.

"It steadies me to tell these things," journalist and adoptee Caitriona Palmer writes, quoting a line from the Seamus Heaney poem 'Crossings'. "I found a grounding — and liberation — in painting a truthful account of growing up adopted and the intense, furtive 'affair' that Sarah [her birth mother] and I conducted".

There isn't a book long enough to contain the stories of the suffering endured by all mothers and their children over the last century, but this one at least puts their experiences to the fore.

"Nothing about them, without them" is a slogan that truly informs its pages, even if there will be those who feel left out. They are not, however, because if we put into action the definition of redress understood in this book, every unheard survivor would ring loud and clear.

To turn to Heaney again, the poet was interested in redress not just as compensation for, or reparation for wrongs done, but as a way to set upright or to raise something to an upstanding position again.



Archbishop of Tuam Francis Duffy talks to local historian Catherine Corless at the Tuam Mother and Baby Home site in what is the Archbishop's first visit since he was installed. Picture: Ray Ryan

In Redress, the authors take that definition to heart and look at the issue from a number of perspectives — legal, literary, philosophical, sociological, to mention a few. It is revelatory for many reasons, not least because it shows in the starkest fashion how Government policy has failed to embrace the tenets of transitional justice — that is, truth-telling, accountability, redress/reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

More importantly, this book offers an alternative. The authors ask: How might democracy evolve if survivors' experiences and expertise were allowed to lead?

To start, the deleted and later retrieved testimony given by some 550 survivors to the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes would have informed the findings, because it would have been

evident early on that abiding by inquiry rules and regulations was not the same as justice.

If we had real justice (and a full democracy), the Birth Information and Tracing Bill 2022 would not be making its way through the Houses of the Oireachtas. There has been widespread criticism of its information session which is mandatory for adoptees where a birth parent has registered a no-contact preference.

Yet Minister for Children Roderic O’Gorman persists in calling it a ground-breaking piece of legislation. It is not; it is following in the same deep groove of secrecy that keeps many archives out of reach.

A State brave enough to look through a human rights lens would not be able to look at the past without acknowledging forced family separation, either. Those words do not even feature in the Government’s plan of 22 actions designed to address the legacy of mother and baby institutions.

How is it that people in all spheres of life can look to the past and see what needs to be done to allow survivors to lead the way?

Among them, the artist, the lawyer, the historian, the academic, the philosopher, the sociologist, the literary critic, the writer, and even the protagonist of Claire Keegan’s haunting book: “[Bill Furlong] found himself asking was there any point in being alive without helping one another?”

Isn’t it time our Government departments and our State agencies joined them?

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#MOTHER AND BABY HOMES

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