

Book review

Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke and James M Smith (eds.)

Redress: Ireland's institutions and Transitional Justice

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In 1996 Ireland closed the last of its Magdalene Laundries. These sites of confinement held those women and girls who were perceived as deviant, whose existence or behaviour transgressed Ireland's rigid Catholic and conservative social order. But these were but one institutional island in what Foucault might have called Ireland's carceral archipelago. At one time during the mid-twentieth century, Ireland had one of the world's highest per capita proportion of its citizens wasting away in asylums. Women pregnant outside marriage were temporarily hidden away in Mother and Baby Homes, their children may have been adopted, or the less fortunate of them were packed into one of Ireland's many industrial schools. When the last Laundry closed, this iniquitous system of social ordering ended, the nation moved on, or so it seemed. But the past has come back to haunt us, and Ireland is currently embroiled in a public reckoning. This edited book, *Redress*, coming from three of the leading activists and academics on these matters, captures this current fractious moment and tries to offer resources with which we can confront the legacies of these injustices.

The size of the volume, 24 chapters, split into 7 sections (1. Truth-telling; 2. Irish State (in)Justice; 3. Transitional Justice: Opportunities, Limits; 4. Motherhood and Adoption; 5. Children in State Care; 6. Knowledge, Memory and the Magdalene Laundries; 7. Truth-telling and the Archive) and the constraints of a book review, makes a decent and useful summary of each chapter impossible. That this text has the feel and size of a handbook more than an edited collection, is in large part because it includes almost all of the leading thinkers, speakers, and advocates. Suffice to say, there is richness, originality and insight in spades across the chapters.

However, it is easy to speak to the main motifs of this volume. With a collection this large, it is usually hard to build momentum behind a bigger argument or agenda. One of this book's great strengths is that it threads two very apparent themes across its over 500 pages. A reader may initially expect this volume to be largely a history of the uses and abuses of these various penal-welfare institutions. Instead, *Redress* is very firmly a book with a clear contemporary agenda, and what is at stake is achieving justice today. Secondly, it quite forcefully makes the case that Ireland needs to enter into a process of transitional justice. Transitional justice, as so many of the chapters argue, is necessary in states that are trying to come to terms with the legacy of some large-scale historical injustice. Taken together, this book is a committed work of academic activism.

But why is such activism required? Who could have followed the litany of institutional exposes over the last three decades and not feel some larger form of reparation and restoration is now required in Ireland? Surely too much has happened for the *status quo* not to be rent asunder. But that is precisely the problem. The redress that has been called for has been thwarted and frustrated by repeated political apathy and resistance.

What we learn in this collection is that redress would mean taking down the barriers that block people from their personal information. Simple questions, that will stun those who take such knowledge for granted, are often cloaked in secrecy: where was I born? Who was my mother? Where are the dead buried? Yet the inability to access information, and the exhaustion of such exasperating searches, are the hallmark of the survivor's life. It is not surprising then to see so many references to Fricker's work on epistemic injustice across a number of the chapters. Redress would also involve reparations from the state, by providing promised healthcare to those who now bear the injuries, trauma and impact of their (sometimes long) institutional lives. For redress to be realised, the state needs to learn how to listen. The state would treat the personal testimonies of those who were there, confined in one (though sometimes more) of these institutions as more than stories of a bygone era. In practice, survivors' accounts are often quite literally an appendage to the official narrative. And redress requires the state to relinquish its grip on Ireland's history by giving access to the considerable archive it has developed in the pursuance of its various committee reviews. Currently, the government's collected archives on Magdalene Laundries are expressly barred from FOI requests. As such, while these institutions may be long since closed, their impact remains, and will continue to linger as long as we lack a commitment to transparency, reconciliation and reparations.

But why does the state continue to pursue such a defensive and unforthcoming approach? After finishing reading *Redress*, I wanted to know what the government is doing, and why, in more precise terms. When the grievances are mounted in the various chapters, the state tends to appear monolithically,

represented by a few headline soundbites (Batt O’Keeffe’s staunch denial or Enda Kenny’s apology, for example). How do the various institutions and actors who are involved in this on the government’s side read the current problem? What norms, meanings and ideas inure consecutive governments and their civil servants to the seemingly rational pleas for transitional justice? How do they justify their various courses of in/action? It strikes me that there is a disparity between the activist and political view of what justice means when it comes to Ireland’s historical abuses. But what vision of justice have the government been pursuing? As such, what might a grounded investigation of this policy process tell us? This is not a critique in any way of this comprehensive and impassioned volume. In firmly establishing the challenges that are faced, the collection allows interested academics and advocates to sense what might next need to be done. If we wish to understand why the government continually fails to achieve transitional justice, then perhaps the next steps also involve a study that tries to ‘see it like a state’, to use James Scott’s phrase (1998).

The book’s overall effect makes for stark reading and one that might run counter to Ireland’s current international image. The Republic seems to be a nation totally transformed since the last Magdalene Laundry closed. Ireland has achieved marriage equality, legalised divorce, and repealed the Eighth amendment – removing the right to life of the unborn from the constitution. Yet, after finishing this collection of essays, one is left with a lingering and unsettling sense that Ireland’s institutional injustice and culture of secrecy has not evaporated, but simply evolved. The collection snaps our mind’s eye from the past and handwringing over what we did or did not know, could or should have done differently. These problems confront us with just as much urgency today. So, what is it we are going to do now?

Reference

Scott JC (1998) *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.