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REDRESS

VOICES

## Extract

# 'My mother was given a half hour's notice to get me ready to have me taken from her'

In a new book on redress and Ireland's institutions, Mary Harney tells her story of illegal adoption and the abuse and neglect that followed.

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*The following extract by Mary Harney comes from the essay "Testimony," which opens the collection REDRESS: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice edited by Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke and James M. Smith and recently published by University College Dublin Press.*

*How will Ireland redress its legacy of institutional abuse and forced adoption? What constitutes justice? How might democracy evolve if the survivors' experiences and expertise were allowed to lead the response to a century of gender and family separation-based abuses?*

*In addition to asking such questions, the essays in REDRESS focus on the structures which perpetuated widespread and systematic abuses in the past and consider how political arrangements continue to exert power over survivors, adopted people and generations of relatives, as well as controlling the remains and memorialisation of the dead.*

*With diverse and interdisciplinary perspectives, they consider how a Transitional Justice-based, survivor-centred, approach might assist those personally affected, policymakers, the public, and academics to evaluate the complex ways in which both the Republic and Northern Ireland have responded to their histories of institutionalisation and forced family separation. Importantly, the essays seek to offer avenues by which to redress this legacy of continuing harms.*

*Mary Harney is a Maine resident, civil-rights activist, painter and educator; she completed her Master's Degree in Irish Studies (2013) and Masters in International Human Rights Law (2020) at NUI-Galway.*

*Currently, she is a PhD Candidate at the Centre for Human Rights, NUI-Galway. Her contribution to the "Testimony" essay is one of eight by fellow survivors, including Mari Steed, Caitríona Palmer, Terry Harrison, Rosemary Adaser, Conrad Bryan, Susan Lohan and Connie Roberts.*

*Harney, Harrison, Adaser, Bryan and Lohan were also members of the Collaborative Forum for Former Residents of Mother and Baby Homes and Related Institutions established by Ireland's Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2018.*

*Whilst the Irish Government published the Collaborative Forum's summary recommendations on 16 April 2019, it declined to publish the forum's report in full.*

### **I. Mary Harney' story**

"MY NAME IS Mary Harney. I am the proud daughter of Margaret 'Peggy' Harney. I was born in Bessborough in 1949. My mother and I stayed together in the Mother and Baby Home for two and a half years. When I was born, I apparently almost died, and I was put into what was known as the 'dying room.' **But my bawling and my crying and my gurgling apparently kept me going until the morning, and I was handed to my mother the next day.**

My mother chose to do some of the most menial tasks within the institution like sluicing out the babies' napkins so that she could sneak in to see me and pick me up, because women were not allowed free access to their children at any time of the day.

My mother was given a half an hour's notice to get me ready to have me taken from her. She and the other women used to knit for their children. And she had made me a little coat and bonnet. And when she got me dressed, she put me in those clothes. She walked me down to the nun who took me from her, and basically that was the last time my mother was ever supposed to see me.

Within half an hour of being taken away from her, the nun came back and threw the little knitted clothes back at my mother and said, 'She won't be needing those where she's going.'

**I was illegally fostered by an elderly couple who knew nothing at all about children, and they took me to a house in Cork that was terrifying in its tininess. I was put into a wooden bed that had above it, on the side wall that I could see quite clearly, a picture of St Michael the Archangel with his trident shoving the snakes back into hell. It had a flickering light in front. This is one of my very early memories. It flickered at night and I could see the flames**

## **coming out of the snakes. The nightmares and the terror are still with me today.**

Because of their neglect, and also because I was probably suffering from malnutrition, a neighbour called the authorities and I was taken from the foster parents in 1954. I was brought to the courthouse in Cork, and the judge sentenced me to twelve and a half years in the Good Shepherd Industrial School at Sunday's Well in Cork City.

I was taken to the industrial school where the doors were locked as soon as I was put in. My childhood there was years of intermittent abuse, but severe in many cases. We were deprived of food if we disobeyed rules. We were always deprived of water; we had no free access to water. We were beaten and we were abused sexually, emotionally and physically. I bear some physical scars, but for many years I bore the mental and emotional scars of my time there.

### **Finding my spirit**

It was there that I learned how to begin to resist. When I refused to lean down and tie my shoes and when I got severe beatings, I would not cry.

## **It was there that I learned that I am Mary Harney. I am not Number 54. I am not 'pig.' I am not 'smelly pig.'**

I am Mary Harney, the proud daughter of a mother that I traced on my own when I was 17 years old. I traced my mother with threats. Not with questions, not with gentleness, but with threats that I would publish my story in The News of the World.

## **Within two weeks of sending that letter, I had a tiny letter, two pages, telling me my mother's married name, that I had two half-sisters, and my mother's address.**

I found my mother with the help of a Catholic priest who was a good person and a magnificent support for me. He brought us together. It was one of the biggest shocks of my life. I had dreamed of a mother that was Greta Garbo and Betty Davis mixed together, holding a long cigarette. What I got was a small, fat Irish woman with two children running around and a long streak of misery for a stepfather.

Without any counselling and support, it is very hard for mothers and children to reunite. I could not put a bond of 17 years back in place. Neither could she. We had a 31-year relationship, and I loved my mother, but it was the same as if I loved someone else's mother. There was something missing. There was no closeness.

## **My mother did not hug very much. I wanted to, but I realised that she needed to and could not. My journey through 'recovery,' as I call it.**

I am not a survivor. I am a small, yet mighty, resisting worker for justice. And I have spent 50 years finding that out. I loved my mother. She is my hero for what she went through as a mother. For that I will always be grateful.

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### Wiped from records

I have a plastic tote box at home filled with redacted information and redacted letters. I have found that my personal truth-telling has been a part of my pathway to healing and recovery, but forgiveness has not yet come for me. I'm working on it. I sometimes feel that I am truth-telling to a government that does not listen and that speaks 'fake' all the time. ... It's fake because there is no action.

**I want to see action because we are telling our truths and the government is not telling us the truth about our identity. ... The government is hiding behind the Freedom of Information Act, all sorts of personal-privacy legislation, and the adoption bill. They are all being created to impede access; to enable the government to once again abdicate its responsibility to its children and women by denying us the knowledge of who we are.**

One of the first things I believe we must do is identify the dead and give the dead names so that we can memorialise the children and the mothers that died in these institutions before we do anything else.

One other legacy, which comes out of Holocaust studies, is that we must teach children the history of this dark chapter in Ireland and keep that memory alive so that it never happens again."

*Edited by James Smith. Published by UCD Press, REDRESS: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice is available nationwide. ISBN 9781910820896 RRP €25 £20 (Paperback) The Editors are donating all royalties in the name of survivors and all those affected by Ireland's carceral institutions and family separation to the charity Empowering People in Care (EPIC).*

