

Redress essays open up the cathedral of Irish silence and shame

Lindsey Earner-Byrne
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Katherine O'Donnell has been seeking justice for the women and children abused in and by Irish institutions

Redress: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice Edited by Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke and James M Smith UCD Press, €25

In the interests of transparency, I need to start by noting I am a member of the board of UCD Press which published *Redress: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice*. However, I can take no credit for this wonderful volume of collaborative and humanist scholarship.

It centres the experience and voices of survivors to highlight that, while many of the abuses were historical, they are not history but, shamefully, "continue as political arrangement that exerts power over survivors, adopted people and generations of relatives, and over the remains and memories of the dead."

The editors, Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke and James M. Smith, academics from the fields of philosophy, law and literature/history, are some of the most consistent public voices and advocates seeking justice for the women and children abused in and by Irish institutions.

It is a brave, creative, radical and unflinching collection, rooted in the concept of transitional justice, defined by the UN as the ways a society attempts to come to terms with large-scale violations, to ensure justice. The volume addresses fundamental questions, such as what is justice and "how might democracy evolve if survivors' experiences and expertise were allowed to lead?"

The structure of the volume underscores with an opening section entitled 'Truth-Telling', which comprises a chapter of testimony that should be compulsory reading for all. I recently ordered a copy of my birth cert online, I did not consider it a privilege but a right to do so.

Mary Harney, however, born in 1949 in Bessborough – the so-called Mother and Baby Home in Cork – has “a tote bag, a plastic tote box, at home filled with redacted information and redacted letters.” In her words: “I am not a survivor. I am a small, yet mighty, resisting worker for justice. And I have spent 50 years finding that out.”

This witness chapter is followed by essays by Anne Enright, Dan Barry, Clair Wills and Emer O’Toole, which are in turn moving, compelling and heartbreaking.

Wills, professor of English literature at Cambridge, explores her own family’s relationship to an Ireland that abandoned, expelled and dumped its ‘unwanted’.

She finds a place that uses weasel terms like “status” instead of class. Although "everybody knows there were the haves and the have-nots. Everyone knows that lots of the have-nots went to England, to become the underclass... to try to make good, or to have their babies in secret. For others there were the industrial schools, the country homes, the asylums, the laundries and the Mother and Baby Homes.”

It is a devastating piece of writing, but her story, she notes, is ‘interesting not for its particularity but for its typicality’. This entire opening section is a reminder of the banality of evil and ends with O’Toole’s simple demand: “Just hear us. Keep your pity”.

All six subsequent sections are of a similar standard and it is impossible to do them all justice. They include a searing essay by Conall Ó Fátharta, the journalist who has done so much to hold the State to account and unearthed early evidence of illegal adoptions.

Maeve O’Rourke, Máiread Enright and Sinéad Ring, through ideas of vulnerability and shame, explore in different ways how the law is also implicated in Ireland’s failure to vindicate the rights of women and children.

Katherine O’Donnell’s incisive analysis of the 2013 Inter-Departmental Committee Report into State Involvement in the Magdalen Laundries, known as the McAleese Report, is informed by philosophical concepts on knowledge and how it is acquired.

The author coins the phrase ‘belligerent ignorance’ to explain the wilful oblivion displayed by the Irish State, which, she argues, has actively resisted the logic of evidence, law and morality.

In separate essays, James M. Smith and Paul Michael Garrett offer nuanced considerations of the history of the Irish State and its capacity to create narratives which obscure and justify extraordinary abuse, including unnecessary death.

Cáitríona Palmer, born in 1972 and adopted out of Saint Patrick's Guild, renders a profoundly moving essay about the correspondence she received from all over the world after publishing her memoir in 2016.

She concludes: "In the cathedral of silence and shame that has settled over Ireland following generations of historical abuse, this correspondence proves that there is redemption to be found in a shared – and open – grief."

This book is 500 pages long, but you will gain something from picking any one of its essays to read.

Lindsey Earner-Byrne is professor of Irish gender history at University College Cork

<https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/book-reviews/redress-essays-open-up-the-cathedral-of-irish-silence-and-shame-41894109.html>