

GPA, Magdalen women and the underground connection

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ONE OF THE strange things about Ireland is that everything seems to be connected. You flip over a story about a high-tech global economy and you find yourself in the 19th century. You scratch polished surfaces and they bleed.

Two of last week's big media stories have this kind of strange underground connection between them. It is a link that may not in itself be very important, but that says much about the nature of history for us, the way the past keeps surfacing with a frantic gulp for air, before it disappears again beneath the waves.

One of the stories I have in mind is the replacement of Tony Ryan as chairman of Guinness Peat Aviation. It is the end of a piece of modern Irish history that lasted for barely a decade. It is a story from a world where things do not last, where empires rise and fall in the blinking of a historical eye. It is the kind of story that implies that, in the global economy, history really is bunk.

The other story, though, is a story of history literally disinterred. A few days ago, the historian Dr Mary Cullen was telling the Desmond Greaves Summer School that women were beginning to rediscover their history, their "lost group memory". While she spoke, the grave of the Magdalen women in the High Park convent in Drumcondra, Dublin, were being emptied and the remains of those who lay there cremated and shifted to two mass graves in Glasnevin. It was a haunting image of a history that remains largely unwritten, a history that in being disturbed still has the power to disturb.

What possible connection can there be between these two histories, between the fall of GPA and the digging up of graves in Drumcondra? The answer can be found on the GPA share register, itself a record of broken dreams. There with the banks and the businessmen, with the great and the

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off from their own histories. Their children, if they had them, were taken from them, they were not allowed to write or receive letters, and they were hardly ever allowed visitors. The past was the enemy to be defeated, personal history a history of shame.

There is, of course, nothing that Irish society now can do for those dead women. Except, that is, let them rest in peace.

For our own sakes, though, we need to remember and understand the history of such women and such institutions. It is a history of what happens when a society chooses not to take responsibility for its own problems and to confine them, under a cloak of religiosity, to some place out of sight and out of mind.

The history of the Magdalen homes, of the Borstal homes run by orders of brothers, of the orphanages and asylums, is a history of a chosen forgetfulness. In other forms, that forgetfulness is still a constant danger. Forgetting the past helps us to forget the present, to keep out of mind today's outcasts and aliens. To compound that forgetfulness, to give that shameful history the sanction of the present, is both dangerous and disgraceful.

This is not just a problem for the nuns at High Park or even for the Catholic Church as a whole. These were Catholic institutions and the church did create and sustain many of the social attitudes which made these women outcast in the first place.

But they had as much to do with Victorian England as with Rome, with the pathological connection between sexuality and madness which created the category of "moral insanity" into which such women were pushed. Many of the institutions existed before the nuns took them over, and the nuns probably ran them with more efficiency and, sometimes at least, clarity than lay people had done. And it was, after all, respectable society which literally sent its dirty linen to be washed by the Magdalens.

IN these matters, to borrow a phrase, the church was no better than it should be. It is, however, reasonable to expect that it should be better now. And if it is objected that all of this is, after all, only about symbols and rituals, it can be replied that the church's field is, after all, symbol and ritual.

The honouring of the dead, the giving of a sense of significance to individual life, the establishment of a continuity between the generations — what is a church for if not for things like these? The religious impulse itself has always been fundamentally connected to the honouring of the dead. To surrender that impulse to the world of the stock exchange and the property-developer is to make a statement about the incapacity of the religious impulse itself to survive in the modern world.

It was in the orphanages and asylums that the rotten heart of Ceausescu's Romania was eventually revealed behind the propaganda and megalomania. Perhaps it is always in the institutions for the weak and the shamed that the true nature of a society can be seen.

When it is seen, the least that the living owe the dead is memory and respect. The rest — the money, the business empires, the entrepreneurial heroes — come and go. The value of individual lives should not be allowed to go with them.

Maria Luddy, and the playwright Patricia Burke-Brogan in her fine play *Echopora*, have tried to rescue the Magdalen homes from amnesia. But it is significant that the last line of Maria Luddy's essay on the subject in *Women Surviving* is that "these women, perhaps the most hidden group in Irish society, do have a history which deserves to be recorded". While that work of rescuing a memory is going on, the most basic memorial, the graveyard, is being obliterated.

The repeated insult is precisely that, in life, these women who are part of a forgotten past were told again and again to forget the past. High Park's own report for 1881 stated: "Until the penitents forget the past, nothing solid can be done towards their permanent conversion."

The women, ex-prostitutes, women who had children out of wedlock, orphaned girls, or even "women perceived to be in danger of losing their virginity", were forcibly cut

past itself. The image of the Magdalen women being unable to rest in peace in the Ireland of global capital, stock markets and business heroes was art trying to construct is, or at least should be, a haunting one. The past is full of unfinished business. It will not be finished until it is acknowledged and given its due.

ONE of the worst things about what the nuns at High Park are doing is that, however unintentionally, it repeats the original insult which society offered to the women in that asylum and others like it. At least 23 such homes for "fallen women" were established in the 19th century, but High Park is important because it was the largest such asylum in Ireland or England. For that reason alone it is exemplary, an embodiment of an underground history that is still largely unacknowledged.

Historians like Catriona Clear and

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