

**Magdalene Laundries, Mother-and-Baby Homes,  
and the Adoption/Fostering Connection**

*Compiled by*  
**Mari Steed**  
**Claire McGettrick**  
**Professor James Smith**  
**(Justice for Magdalenes)**  
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## *Overview*

The links between Magdalene laundries/asylums, mother-and-baby homes, and adoption/fostering in and from Ireland are many and confusing. In fact, many adopted adults in and from Ireland confuse the two types of institution, often believing their natural mothers gave birth to them in Magdalene asylums as opposed to mother-baby homes. And while the two types of institution functioned separately, there was a great deal of traffic between the two.

Of primary concern to the survivor advocacy organization Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), as well as to family members seeking to trace relatives lost to the laundries or adoption/fostering, is the lack of access to pertinent records. Mother-and-baby homes in Ireland were State-funded, and as such regulated and inspected. But Magdalene asylums were privately run by religious orders, and although there is mounting evidence proving girls and women were remanded to these institutions by various government bodies, including the Departments of Education, Health, and Justice, they were not regulated or inspected as such. Even when the State began paying capitation grants to commercial laundries such as the Sean McDermott Street laundry run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge in 1960, still no inspections or proper regulation occurred. So movement between mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries may not be a matter of strict record (although it is highly likely the religious orders would have records – JFM has requested these records be turned over to a government body such as the national archives, the Departments of Education, or Health and Children), but as Appendices 18 and 19 of the initial JFM-IHRC submission makes clear, there was a “special provision” for transferring women between these institutions as early as 1932, and one religious order acknowledges that this practice continued at least into the 1950s. Survivor testimonies (below) only underscore these connections.

While society and the Irish government in general have moved toward more openness with regard to seeking family members lost for the above reasons, there remains a cloak of secrecy surrounding records associated with girls and women remanded to Magdalene asylums as well as to mother-baby homes in Ireland. This is partly due to the still-existing stigma of out-of-wedlock birth, especially for women of an older generation. But, this cloak of secrecy simultaneously conceals inappropriate adoption/fostering placements, as it does questionable referrals to the laundries (such as young girls under age 14 sent from industrial schools to laundries). Both the religious-run adoption societies (e.g. Sacred Heart Adoption Societies [both Bessboro and Castlepollard mother-and-baby homes registered as adoption societies as early as 1953, Sean Ross Abbey was registered sometime prior to 1960], St. Patrick’s Home, Navan Road [also a mother-and-baby home which registered as an adoption society by 1953], St. Patrick’s Guild, Rotunda Girls Aid Society, etc.) and the Magdalene laundries have notoriously bad track records for providing post-adoption trace assistance to mothers, offspring and related family members.

A body of evidence exists with the Adoption Board in the form of complaints lodged over the years, particularly against the adoption agencies. This evidence includes the discovery of likely hundreds of illegal adoptions, both to the United States and within Ireland.

Of particular note in this regard are the St Rita’s adoptions. St. Rita’s was a private nursing home at 68 Sandford Road, Ranelagh, Dublin, which was opened in 1947 by midwife Mary

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Keating. While some married women gave birth at St. Rita's, there were also quite a number of non-marital births, which often resulted in illegal adoptions. In fact, in January 1965, Mary Keating was convicted of forging the official birth register – i.e. falsely registering adopted babies as the natural children of their adoptive parents.

Incredibly, despite this conviction, Mary Keating never lost her licence and continued her (very profitable) business well into the 1970's. According to Mike Milotte's *Banished Babies*, infants were secretly exported from St. Rita's to the US for adoption, however no figures are available as many of the adoptions were illegal and involved false birth registrations. (c.f. <http://www.adoptionrightsalliance.com/stritas.htm>).

Likewise, many testimonials have been given to JFM in regard to lack of information from the relevant religious orders running Magdalene laundries when traces of family members are requested.

On a personal level, it can come as a huge shock to an adopted person to discover that their natural mother was not only in a Magdalene Laundry, but in some cases, never left the laundry. While adopted people never sign up to their own adoptions, many will assume that it's "part of the deal" that their natural mothers went on to have a happy life. It is a source of great distress to adopted people who discover that their natural mothers never had any kind of life outside Magdalene Laundries. In the case of one of JFM's committee members, Angela M., her mother, Mary N. spent a total of 50 years in different Magdalene Laundries. Though Mary did not work in later years, she died behind laundry walls, a year after Angela reunited with her.

References to the links between the laundries and mother-baby homes may be found in Professor James Smith's work, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Chap. 2); Mike Milotte's *Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland's Baby Export Business*; *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools* by Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan; and Moira Maguire's recent book *Precarious Children*.

Advocacy groups such as Justice for Magdalenes, Adoption Rights Alliance and Adoption Support Network of Ireland (along with the former AdoptionIreland) have made every effort to prepare meticulous tracing guides for adopted/fostered adults and those seeking information on family members remanded to Magdalene laundries. Online versions of these guides may be viewed at the following web links:

<http://www.magdalenelaundries.com/Research%20Guide%20for%20Relatives%20of%20Magdalene%20Women.pdf>

<http://www.adoptionrightsalliance.com/searchandreunion.htm>

## ***Case Studies***

### **Josephine and Mary F.**

Josephine F. was the youngest of four children born out-of-wedlock in 1933 to Johanna F., from a small village outside of Enniscorthy, Wexford. Although Josephine and her daughter Mary F. reunited in 2001, Josephine is still unable to share a great deal of her early years. From records obtained by her daughter Mary F., it appears that Josephine may have been fostered early on, either by neighboring family/ies or relations. Mary F. was able to obtain a copy of Josephine's original birth certificate and a baptismal certificate issued by St Aidan's, Enniscorthy, showing her year of birth as 1933 and place of birth as the county workhouse (now known as St John's), Enniscorthy; however, Josephine herself is in possession of what appears to be an Irish baptismal certificate (parish origin unknown) showing year of birth as 1940 (month and day agree on both). This would indicate her records were falsified at some stage, although by who remains unknown.

At some point in her early life, Josephine was sent to St Dominick's Industrial School for girls, managed by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Waterford. Around age 14, she was then sent to work at a small 'sewing room' run by the Sisters of Mercy at St Maries of the Isle, Cork [<http://homepage.eircom.net/~stals/>]. Within a year, she was sent back to St Dominick's, but on this occasion was placed in the Good Shepherd's Waterford Magdalene Laundry, part of the same convent complex. According to a 1997 letter sent by the Good Shepherd order to Mary F., Josephine was found to be "gifted at intricate needlework and colours" and was put to work as a seamstress. She remained in their "care" from roughly 1947 to 1957, whereupon she was given a work referral for employment with Our Lady's Hospital, Dublin, as a ward aide.

The hospital has confirmed in writing to Mary F. that Josephine was employed from 1957-1959. At some point in late 1959, Josephine F. met Mary F.'s father, Arthur W., a Dublin-born man around her age who had a common-law English wife and two small children at that stage. Arthur and his family had relocated back from Birmingham UK to Dublin, ostensibly for work (and because he had family in the area). He began a relationship with Josephine unbeknownst to his partner Joan. Josephine also states she was unaware he had a partner, although she states she suspected there was 'another woman' in the picture. By autumn 1959, Josephine discovered she was pregnant.

She states there was a promise of marriage from Arthur and that they completed banns and necessary paperwork to be married in Dublin. However, according to Josephine, Arthur showed up to the event 'three sheets to the wind'. Josephine claims she would not tolerate Arthur's drink problem and called off the marriage. Accounts given by Arthur's eldest daughter, Jean R., tell a different story – Arthur was generally supportive of Josephine and, in fact, regretted not fighting to keep Mary F. after her birth, but could not desert his current partner and children.

Josephine was likely referred by staff at Our Lady's Hospital to St Patrick's mother-and-baby home (also a registered adoption society after 1953) on Eglinton (now Navan) Road. She was accommodated there until December 1960, when she was sent out briefly as holiday help to the family of a Blackrock, Dublin solicitor. She returned to St Patrick's in late January and was then sent to the Good Shepherd-run Dunboyne mother-baby home, but was only there for a period of

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two days before being sent back to St Patrick's. There are no records and Josephine has no recollection of why she was sent back (she does recall that she suffered from toxemia and may have been shuttled back for medical reasons). Further baffling is the fact that in early February 1960, she was sent down to Cork, to the Bessboro mother-baby home run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary and Jesus, who also operated the Sacred Heart Adoption Society from the same premises.

Upon admittance to Bessboro', records show she was issued the house name of 'Philomena' (although she contends that all the girls knew each other's real names and never used their house names) and was seen by Dr Eithne Conlon, a resident county obstetrics practitioner. Medical notes show concern over 'disproportion' (a common term at the time for a small mother, possibly unable to give birth vaginally). Josephine's Rh factor was given as negative, but no other abnormalities or problems were noted. She was in fact delivered via c-section on 8 April 1960 of a baby girl (Mary F.) weighing 5 lbs. 15 oz. at St Finbarr's Hospital (now part of UCC facilities). Mary F. requested copies of her medical records from UCC/St Finbarr's in 1996, but was told in writing by staff that "they simply don't keep older things."

Josephine F. and Mary F. resided in care at Bessboro' until December 1961. During this time, Mary F. became one of the participants in a 3-in-1 and 4-in-1 clinical vaccine trial organized by the (then) Burroughs-Wellcome (now Glaxo-Wellcome) pharmaceutical company. These trials were approved by the Sacred Heart order without written or oral consent from the present mothers and became the subject of an investigation by the Laffoy Commission in 2001. Judicial Review proceedings seeking, *inter alia*, a declaration that the Order which established the Vaccine Trials Inquiry was *ultra vires* the Act of 2000, were initiated in November 2003. On 25 November, 2003, an undertaking was given to the High Court, by the Commission, that it would not conduct any hearings in relation to the matters within the ambit of the Order, until the matter was settled. The practical effect of this undertaking was that the work of the Division was suspended at that point and never re-commenced, given the subsequent decision of the Court, that the Order was *ultra vires* the Act. Both Mary and Josephine, in Dublin as part of their first reunion/meeting, were interviewed by barristers and investigators on behalf of the Laffoy Commission in 2001.

Mothers at the Bessboro' home (and in most of the mother-and-baby homes) were required to stay with their children until they were adopted or fostered out, and even breastfed, cared for, bathed and clothed their children. Josephine F. still possesses photos from this time, including Mary F.'s first birthday. She states that Mary F.'s father, Arthur, visited Bessboro' and held Mary as an infant and Sacred Heart records verify this, although they state that the name Josephine told Mary was her father is not what their records show (yet will not divulge what name they have). Josephine did, however, provide the correct name as Mary was later able to trace her father (deceased in 2001) and his 5 children in Birmingham.

Sometime in mid-1960, Mary's American adoptive parents, Joseph and Helena T. of Philadelphia, who were unable to have children of their own and frustrated by the seven-year wait common to most US Catholic Charities adoption agencies, were made aware by Irish relations of the availability of Irish children for adoption. They were put in touch with the Sacred Heart Adoption Society and corresponded with Mother Barbara Findlay, head of the

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society at that time. In August 1960, an Irish cousin living in Philadelphia was planning to go to Ireland on holiday and was asked by Joseph and Helena to visit Bessboro' and meet the little girl Mother Barbara had suggested to them, Mary F. (at this stage, only correspondence, in-home studies and photos had been exchanged). This cousin wrote a compelling note back to the couple, stating that Bessboro' "looked like a castle" and that "Mary was a beautiful child" with big brown eyes and brown hair with "light through it." By November 1961, all necessary paperwork and payments had been processed and Mary F. was prepared to fly to the US under the escort of a Dr Helen Forde, also a resident county physician affiliated with Bessboro' and along with another Bessboro' child being adopted by a family in Brooklyn, NY (now known as Sheila H.). On 1 December 1961, Mary and Dr Forde arrived at JFK airport in New York, where they met the collective family of Joseph and Helena T. Joseph captured the event on 16mm movie film.

Mary states her adoptive upbringing was largely satisfying – Joseph and Helena adopted another child, Martin J., from Bessboro' in 1964. But in 1978, during her senior year of high school, Mary F. found herself in the same predicament as her mother – pregnant out of wedlock. She was convinced by her family to go to a Catholic-run home for unwed mothers in Philadelphia and relinquish her child. On 11 May 1978, she also gave birth to a healthy girl, named Erin (later known as Kerry) and formally relinquished her in July 1978.

By the mid-1990's, Mary F. could no longer ignore her long-held curiosity about her own background as well as her daughter's whereabouts. She embarked on a search for both, with somewhat mixed blessings from her adoptive mother (her father Joseph had passed in 1990). While she was able to quickly communicate with Catholic Charities in Philadelphia and with a fair amount of hurdles, able to correspond and eventually meet Kerry, her search for her own mother took considerably longer and was met with one roadblock after another, particularly with the Sacred Heart Adoption Society in Cork. But she persisted and, relying on help from a sympathetic and knowledgeable genealogy researcher in London, was finally able to locate her mother Josephine in 2001.

Mary still works to help her mother fill in gaps in her background and is now filing a FOIA request on her behalf with the Department of Education to gain access to her "school" records and any information pertinent to her movement to the Laundry in Waterford.

### **Elizabeth and Kathy F.**

Elizabeth was born in Cork in 1949, and in 1956, at the age of 7, her mother died leaving 7 children. The family were then living in England and the 6 girls were placed in a Protestant orphanage there. A priest in England got in touch with the priests of the family's original parish in Cork and arrangements were made to bring all six girls to St Finbarr's Industrial School, Sunday's Well, Cork (run by the Good Shepherd Sisters). Elizabeth remained there until 1965, when she was sent to work in the Sacred Heart Convent, Mt. Anville, Dublin.

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Elizabeth soon found herself living alone in Dublin and found it hard to make a living. She was placed on remand to the Magdalen laundry at Sean McDermott Street, Dublin, in April 1968 for shoplifting. Her daughter, Kathy F. is still awaiting records pertaining to Elizabeth's remand from the Department of Justice.

After remand to Sean McDermott Street, Elizabeth soon found she was pregnant and was sent to the Sacred Heart mother-and-baby home at Bessboro', Cork in early February 1969. She gave birth to a baby girl on 23 April 1969 and called her "Faith." Faith was adopted to Dublin on 20 June 1969 and her adopted parents called her Kathy.

Kathy F. had a happy childhood and when she was 18, she approached the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society (CPRS, now known as Cunamh) agency in Dublin to seek her mother. They told Kathy that the only way she would meet her mother was if Elizabeth got in touch with them, and to go home and forget it. Kathy phoned the agency every year to see if there was any news. In January 2003, with the help of online adoption groups AdoptionIreland and Adoption Support Network of Ireland (ASNI), Kathy applied to search for her mother and finally got an appointment in September 2006 with a social worker. She was told in a meeting with her social worker in March 2007 that her mother was dead and had passed away in November 1993.

Elizabeth had left Ireland for England in 1970 after falling pregnant again, and had married, but the marriage didn't work out and the son born to her and her husband went to live with his father. Elizabeth lost touch with her sisters and her son. Elizabeth leaped to her death in November 1993 at age 44. She was living alone and when her body was found, there was an appeal for relatives in the local papers and on radio.

No one responded.

### **Johanna S. and Cathy D.**

*(Parts of this story have been adapted from an original article appearing in the Fort Lauderdale, Florida Sun-Sentinel, 6 September 2003)*

Johanna S. and Cathy D.'s stories re-entwine when a young niece of Johanna's in Listowel learns of her aunt Johanna living for years at the Good Shepherd-run Laundry at Sunday's Well, Cork, after having had a baby out of wedlock at the Bessboro' mother-and-baby home. After Johanna's remand to Sunday's Well, her family did (in contradiction to the actions of many Irish families) try to get her out. But it was Johanna's own shame and what she had been taught by the nuns that kept her there. She was told that she would "bring disgrace" on her family if she returned to them.

In 1993, this young niece received an alarming call from the convent. "Do you want us to bury your aunt?" asked a nun coldly. Seemingly Johanna, then 82, had pneumonia, complications from a broken hip. The niece told the nun certainly no, wondering what kind of medical care

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Johanna was getting, and that the family would come and get her. At last, Johanna agreed to go home.

Ten years later, the niece and Johanna nervously prepared for another momentous occasion in their lives. As Johanna dressed for a visitor she thought would never come, her large hands fumbled at her side to secure her precious treasure.

"What's that?" asked her niece gently, curiously. Ten years the two had lived together, but the younger woman had never seen the ragged pouch Johanna held. Surely there was a pause as Johanna weighed the situation, the secure present against the silent secrets and betrayals of a convent past. She chose at last to share her guarded possession. Out slid

"Catherine Regina," explained Johanna.

"How long have you had these?" asked the startled niece.

"Forever," said Johanna.

Minutes later, Catherine Regina, red-haired and freckled, walked through the door in Listowel, Ireland, materializing out of a 44-year void. "I didn't know if you were alive or dead," cried the then 91-year-old Johanna.

Catherine Regina D., the child stripped away at birth, could have said the same. She would not have been surprised, in fact, to find her mother interred in the mass, unmarked, weed-claimed cemetery plot behind the Good Shepherd Convent in County Cork.

To Cathy D., who had just seen Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* (where he used the Sunday's Well Magdalene asylum as the model for his film), Mullan's film is a disturbing peek at the cruel, twisted world her mother inhabited for 40 years. It was in the same convent depicted in the film that Johanna, locked behind the fence and thick walls, was forced to wash away her "sins."

"She was brainwashed and dehumanized," said Cathy, who had cried through three screenings of the film.

"The first time I saw the movie, it was very hard for me," she said. "The scene where the baby is taken from the mother, and the mother is screaming, 'my baby, my baby,' I feel that baby is me."

"It was slavery, that's what it was," Cathy said angrily.

Cathy was 4 1/2 when she arrived in New York in 1958, with a brogue so thick her adoptive family couldn't understand her. It didn't take long for her new sister, five years older, to capitalize on that accent. Taking Cathy around to friends, she'd say, "Gimme a nickel and you can hear her talk."



Cathy grew up on Long Island. She came to Florida in 1991 as a traveling nurse and decided to stay. After her adoptive mother died in 1992, Cathy lost contact with the family. It was her mother, she said, who held the family together.

In 1987, she began what would turn out to be a 15-year search for her natural mother. "I thought if I found her, I could help her."

She had only her passport and the erroneous information, passed on by her adoptive parents, that she had been abandoned on the steps of the Sacred Heart Convent in Cork, Ireland.

She wrote Sister Sarto, the tracing coordinator at Sacred Heart, to ask for help in locating her mother. Letters went back and forth without results.

Then in '96, Cathy saw a "20/20" segment on the US-Irish adoption scheme entitled 'The Lost Children of Ireland.' "I saw all these mothers crying, they were in search of their kids. And Sarto was on there saying how she was trying to help." Even then, Cathy did not associate her mother with the grim laundries. Rather, she was identifying with the separation. "I had visions of my mother married with a family somewhere."

The first break came in 2001, after Cathy got a computer and discovered online a group called AdoptionIreland, through which Cathy met activist Bernadette Joyce. Among other things, she was able to obtain a copy of Cathy's birth certificate.

"I finally felt I existed. Here I have all these letters (from the church and the Southern Health Board of Ireland) saying I don't exist. It was a feeling of the pieces being put back together. I had an identity. I belonged to someone."

But the wheels were just beginning to turn. "Bernadette Joyce was now on a mission to get Sister Sarto to find out where my mother is." After repeated rebuffs, Bernadette made a stirring phone call to Sister Claire O'Sullivan, Mother Superior of Good Shepherd.

"With all the bad publicity and all, why don't you make some good news and make two people happy. Let us know what happened to Johanna S. We have her daughter from America looking for her."

Finally Good Shepherd Sister called the niece with whom Johanna was living. Johanna's daughter was searching for her, the nun said.

She then added that it would not be a good idea at Johanna's age to allow the reunion to take place.

On the contrary, the niece said, "It would make her life complete."

Only then did Cathy learn her mother had remained all those years at Good Shepherd, just 15 minutes down the road from Sacred Heart Bessboro'.

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In June of 2002, Cathy and Johanna finally were reunited. The physical resemblance between the two is remarkable.

Cathy was saddened and shocked that shortly after meeting, her mom said to her, "You found the black sheep of the family."

In that moment, Cathy realized that though mother and child "lived in two different worlds, we shared the same emotional stigma that we were bad people and no one really wanted us. We never truly belonged to anyone."