



Mary Raftery Taking Mary home

There is a remarkable object on Dublin's Leeson Street, close to the junction with St. Stephen's Green. A large wall has been built with a number of small plaques on it. Some of them have names and dates. Several just say "remains unknown".

This is Gerard Mannix Flynn's huge "extallation", an extraordinary memorial to women who worked all their lives in the Magdalen laundry at High Park convent in Drumcondra.

These women died, were buried, exhumed, cremated and reinterred all at the convenience of Church and State, neither of which has shown the slightest concern that the laws of the land were flagrantly broken in the process.

Anthony O Broin lives in the north of Ireland and has a very personal interest in Mannix Flynn's memorial wall. He was hoping against hope that it might give him some information about his aunt Mary Hastings.

For most of his life, Anthony did not even know he had an aunt Mary. She was never mentioned in the house. A cousin visiting from England let the cat out of the bag, and Anthony heard for the first time how his mother's sister had become pregnant and simply disappeared. She ended up in the Magdalen laundry at High Park. No one knows what happened to her child.

In one of those peculiar twists of fate, Anthony (who is an electrician) was working on the wiring at High Park convent during the early 1970s. From his perch on top of a ladder, he saw an elderly woman, the image of his mother, walking towards him. She passed and vanished into the steam of the laundry room before he could follow her.

Anthony was advised by members of his family that he should not pursue Mary, that having been in High Park for close to 50 years she would be institutionalised and could be distressed by any contact. She died sometime in the mid-1970s, and Anthony has been haunted ever since by the image of her disappearing into the steam.

In 1993, Anthony read in the newspapers that the nuns were exhuming and cremating the bodies at High Park. They wanted to clear their land in order to sell it. Anthony and his brother decided that they would take their aunt Mary home to be buried with the rest of the family.

The High Park nuns, however, denied all knowledge of Mary, saying that they had no one of that name in their records. Anthony returned home, mystified and disheartened.

It was exactly a year ago that I first started asking questions about the High Park burials. Of the 155 remains in the unmarked plot, I discovered that 80 of the deaths had never been notified to the authorities. The nuns had no names for 45 of the women - several of them were identified merely as Magdalen of the Good Shepherd, Magdalen of Lourdes, and so forth. Most of these women had died as recently as the 1960s and '70s.

Since 1880, it has been a criminal offence to fail to register a death which occurs on your premises. In the case of High Park, it was the duty of the nuns (the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge) to do this. The current penalty for this offence is a fine of £2,000, six months in prison, or both.

When applying for an exhumation certificate in 1993, the nuns made no secret of their failure to register so many of the women's deaths. The Department of the Environment was unconcerned with this flagrant breach of the law, and granted the licence without demur. Even when an additional 22 bodies that no one knew anything about were discovered in the mass grave during the exhumation, the Department still had no difficulty rushing through a further exhumation licence in order to assist the nuns in clearing their lands for sale.

I wrote about this last August in this newspaper. It became a news story for a few days and then simply vanished. This week I asked the Department of the Environment had they made any internal inquiries as to how they had turned a blind eye to breaches of the law in 1993.

They told me that they felt no such inquiry was required, and that anyway it was a matter for the gardai.

The gardai in turn told me that they had looked into the matter last autumn and had concluded that no criminal investigation was warranted. No politician has questioned how laws in this regard were so blatantly ignored by Church and State.

The nuns themselves have never expressed any regret for the way in which they treated their unpaid laundry workers either in life or in death.

As another Easter passes, with its Christian message of renewal and new life, the nuns continue to preserve a blanket of silence around their shameful Magdalen laundries.

Meanwhile, Anthony O Broin continues to search for his Aunt Mary, tormented by the thought that she has disappeared literally without trace, almost as if she had never existed. With her death not registered, her only memorial is likely to be as one of the "remains unknown" on Mannix Flynn's stark extallation in Leeson Street.

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