

book reviews

Suffer the little children

Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan

New Island Books, Dublin, 1999 (Irish edition)

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In 1946, Fr Edward Flanagan, founder in Nebraska of Boy's Town, visited his native Ireland. He was feted there as befitted a man who had committed his life to the care of others, and whose achievements had been portrayed by Hollywood in an Academy Award winning film. His message, however, was one that his countrymen did not want to hear – that the practices of childcare in Ireland in its Industrial Schools were abusive and destructive of young lives. In a pattern which is all too familiar, church leaders and politicians excoriated him as ill informed and mischievous. Fr Flanagan's brief campaign, well informed as it was by local sources, did not survive his sudden death in 1948.

It was not until 1970 that the Kennedy Committee, established by the Minister for Education against the advice of his Department to inquire into the Industrial School system, exposed an appallingly mismanaged and inadequate system of care for Ireland's dispossessed young. Though the Kennedy Committee report was to herald the end of Ireland's squalid Industrial School system, it was another three years before it saw the light of day and more than another decade before many of its recommendations were implemented. The twenty years since have seen a continuing exposé of scandals associated with these facilities. This culminated in 1999 with the award-winning documentary *States of Fear*, which presented the horrific stories of survivors from their own perspective.

Ireland's Industrial Schools had their origins in nineteenth century legislation to provide for children deemed to be in need of care and control outside the workhouses established under the 1838 Poor Law. They expanded significantly in the later part of the nineteenth century in response to widespread poverty in the country, but also in response to the perceived proselytising amongst the children of the poor by Protestant churches.

Through most of the second half of the twentieth century there were fifty-two Industrial Schools in Ireland, which accommodated over 150,000 children over their history. At their peak they 'cared' for 8,000 children. They were principally operated by Catholic Religious Orders, although local parishes managed two. The largest providers were the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy. Also significant were the Oblate Fathers, the Rosminians, and the Daughters of Charity, amongst others. Many Industrial Schools were co-located with schools for the middle classes, and in some cases, the infamous Magdalen laundries, where 'immoral' women, were detained.

Suffer Little Children is written by Mary Raftery, producer of *States of Fear*, and Dr Eoin O'Sullivan, social policy analyst

and lecturer at Trinity College, Dublin. It catalogues poignantly and powerfully a history of sustained abuse – of horrific beatings, starvation, forced labour and commercial exploitation, sexual assault, deprivation of education, humiliation, and denial of affection.

Raftery and O'Sullivan demolish the now familiar arguments used to mitigate the responsibility of the Religious Orders for this – that the abuse was the actions of 'a few rotten apples', that the term 'sexual abuse' had not been invented at the time and as a concept was not well understood, that the Institutions were underfunded by the State, and that the methods of care, particularly with respect to corporal punishment, were consistent with prevailing societal norms.

The authors demonstrate that the abuse was not incidental or episodic, but ubiquitous and endemic. They demonstrate that while more is now known about child sexual abuse, its prevalence was well understood by government, Gardai and religious leaders. They show that while the funding for childcare was never lavish, it was consistently higher, on a per capita basis, than the weekly income of the families from which the children were taken. Survivors consistently report that they were better fed and received better care in their own families. They demonstrate that the excessive physical punishment meted out upon defenceless children was proscribed from the earliest stages by the founders of the religious congregations that practised them, and were consistently outside the guidelines of the responsible government department.

This is not a book for the prurient or the voyeuristic. While it reports directly the experiences of many survivors, its focus is upon a system, which allowed abuse to occur, rather than upon the deeds of individual perpetrators. Its conclusions about that system are compelling. The Industrial Schools were in essence a commercial operation. Britain, from similar beginnings and the same legislative base, abandoned the discredited congregate care model of care for children fifty years earlier than Ireland where the church hierarchy actively discouraged fostering. Despite claims that care was provided for these children by the charity of the religious, the reality was that it was paid for by the Irish State. The farm produce of the Institutions, which was generated by forced labour and never accounted for, augmented capitation rates paid by the State.

The system enforced the moral authoritarianism of the church and functioned in such a way as to reinforce the rigid class distinctions of the country. Its subjects were the poor and their offence often only that of having been born illegitimate. The children of the Schools were kept apart from the children of

the middle classes except where they were required to be their servants. In a cruel irony, while many were placed in the Schools for truancy, they received little in the way of education and were placed on leaving as unskilled farm workers or domestic servants.

The system survived because of the complicity of the State. This was in part neglect; a failure to inspect, monitor and enforce guidelines. Its deeper origins however are in the conception of the Irish State. The State conceived itself as minimalist. The task of caring for the vulnerable was understood as the responsibility of the Church and the family. It is only in the past decade that the Irish State has come to accept that its children may be failed by both their families and the Church, and the State may have to take active responsibility for their care.

This book is that rare achievement, a work of scholarship written for a popular audience. It will find an audience amongst those with an historical interest and those interested in the relationship between church and State. It has also some important lessons for those outside Ireland working in out-of-home care and those managing or regulating it.

Wherever there is vulnerability there will be those willing to exploit it, whether for profit, for personal gratification or out of sheer maliciousness. This is true of the care of the young, the elderly and those with a disability. One abiding rationale for the State is the protection of the vulnerable. Vigilance by the State is not sufficient however to ensure safety in care. It must be expressed in processes, which establish standards and which systematically monitor performance against them.

Abusive practice proliferates in closed systems. Raftery and O'Sullivan quote Irish playwright Patricia Burke Brogan, herself formerly a Mercy Sisters novice, who left the Congregation in protest at the treatment of women in the Order's laundries:

Total unquestioning obedience like that is a very dangerous concept. If you close your mind and you don't allow questions to be asked, the danger is very great that abuse of that power can happen.

The best defence against disturbed practices is transparency. The resistance by the managers of Ireland's Industrial Schools to proposed 'external visitors' is instructive.

When care is given over to the ignorant, the untrained or the basely motivated, its subjects are at risk. There is a lesson here for the would-be privatisers of contemporary services. Good care requires sustained attention over time by a committed and well-trained workforce. It cannot be purchased as dehumanised service units.

It is fashionable these days to decry deinstitutionalisation as the cynical cost cutting of economic liberalism. There is some merit in this view; services which are poorly resourced and managed are a poor alternative. We should not lose sight, however, of the fact that the old institutions for the care of children, the intellectually disabled and the mentally ill were evil places – not because the people who worked there and managed them were evil (though Raftery and O'Sullivan give many examples of where this was the case), but because of the imbalance of power that was their hallmark. They had as their foundation the power of carers over the cared for, often with tragic effect.

The final word lies with the survivors of Ireland's Industrial Schools. Ed speaks of his time at St Joseph's Industrial School in Kilkenny:

I cried when they brought me back to St Joseph's, to all that pain and abuse and torment. I wanted to stay in prison, but they wouldn't let me. I have no happy memories of my childhood. I don't remember a single good day.

Reviewed by:

Dr Tom Keating
Regional Director
Dept of Human Services
Hume Region

Supporting parents of teenagers: A handbook for professionals

John Coleman and Debi Roker (eds)

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2001. 223 pages

This book would be a very useful addition to the library of workers with young people or with the families of young people. It is intended as a practice tool for professionals but it also serves to draw together in an economical and readable way the dramatic movement that has occurred in Britain in recent years in the area of parenting support. The term 'parenting support' is used generically to cover a range of activities *which offer learning opportunities* (17) to parents dealing with the issues that arise as children move through adolescence to adulthood. One of the insights the book offers is the appreciation that during the transition young people may be expressing either/or, or both, the child and the adult within them. The parent needs to negotiate the variations without

being driven to coercive over-reactions or giving up. Changes in society have presented additional challenges and some understandings have been reached about what forms of parenting reduce the likelihood of problems and improve longer term outcomes for their children.

John Coleman and Debi Roker are respectively Director and Assistant Director of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence which for many years has been conducting useful research with young people, and producing literature and training material of considerable substance. This book is no exception and has drawn together contributions based, firstly, on a strong appreciation of the diversity of young people and of parents, and the complexity of normal experience and