

Opinion – Irish-American Diplomacy and the Catholic Orphanage Scandal

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, NOV 21 2021

Scandals involving diplomats and child protection issues are not uncommon. As recently as last year concern was expressed and remedial action on this issue sanctioned against certain foreign embassies in the UK. However, the subject of this article suggests a de facto policy on child adoption in the Irish state, implemented over a period of decades, which raises wider issues about the scrupulousness of the Irish-American diplomatic relationship. Predictably, it was the *Associated Press*, and not an Irish news outlet who broke the story on what was to become known as the “Tuam babies’ scandal”. Similar ad hoc cemetery sites have been uncovered at Bessborough and elsewhere. As forensic reports confirmed, “A mass grave containing the remains of babies and young children has been discovered at a former Catholic orphanage near Galway in Ireland”.

The state began excavation in March 2017, and government-appointed investigators reported the first conclusive proof following a historian’s efforts to trace the fates of nearly 800 children who perished there. Catherine Corless, who exposed the scandal at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, told the Irish Parliament that she was “naive” to believe that the bodies would be exhumed after they were discovered. Corless told the Committee of her “dismay” that the Tuam site was returned to its original condition following her discovery and that the remains were not respected. Some of the accounts of what was discovered in the initial investigations at Tuam are reminiscent of reports from conflict archaeologists from sites of political violence. Whereas these early childhood deaths occurred over a very lengthy period of time and only because of neglect, the actions of Bon Secour Sisters in consigning dead infants to an improvised mass grave, is shocking.

Tuam is by no means an isolated case of mass graves of infants that perished having been left in the Irish state’s care. However, what is less widely appreciated is that this episode also uncovered a sophisticated international relations network involving the Foreign Service staff of the US State Department and its Embassy in Ireland and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. These revelations shed an entirely new light on Ireland’s “special relationship” with the USA. Indeed, it was stated by a witness to the discovery of bundles of child passport applications in the state archives, that “a conspiracy of religious orders, pseudo-adoption agencies and diplomatic staff had created a web of secrecy akin to a spy network of such complexity it rivalled the resources of the FBI.” These applications are extraordinary in their volume, and that the widespread issuing of child passports required compliance on the part of the immigration authorities in the USA and Ireland.

For much of the twentieth century in Ireland the moral imperative of concealing the stigma of conception outside marriage permitted a clandestine industry of adoption and emigration with the principal destination of these babies and young children being the USA. Concomitant with the international export of adoptees to the USA, living conditions for those left in the state’s care were disturbingly bad, resulting in appallingly elevated levels of childhood morbidity, in some instances even approaching a death rate of almost 50% of those in care. These are appallingly high figures of childhood morbidity, many times in excess of the figures for infant death in the general population. This suggests there was a fundamental neglect of the care needs of Irish children born out of wedlock, which is in juxtaposition to the highly regimented operation of international adoption.

By comparison, the international dimensions of these activities have been neglected by analysts and yet the records

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point to a thriving international trade in babies and children, facilitated by the Foreign Service staffs of Ireland and the USA. In short, it is also an international relations scandal of a magnitude not previously appreciated by IR scholars of the period. It receives no attention in the speeches of American Presidents of the day and it hardly merits a record in the annals of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. The records of these child passports, however, tell their own story which cannot be ignored.

Traditional international relations studies hitherto have placed greater emphasis on the supportive role of the USA in bolstering the fledgling Irish Free state administration, and the welcome phenomena of remittance earnings coming back to Ireland from the many Irish legally and illegally laboring in the USA. It is less well known that a sophisticated international baby trade operation remained throughout this period an integral part of Irish-US relations. These sophisticated networks and tagging consular and airline staff with adoption agencies, required the compliance of Foreign Service staff of both countries, frequently endorsing grave breaches of international law.

This trade also necessitated the falsification and rapid issue of passports for these babies and young children; redaction and modification of birth-dates to permit such international adoptions, and a sophisticated web of US and Irish Embassy and senior official endorsement of an adoption business which constituted the egregious violation of international law over a period of many decades. There is insufficient space in this article to even touch on the psychological pain inflicted on generations of these families by the “disappearance” of their babies and children, and the concealment and non-keeping of records which prevents their families now from establishing their identity.

The remainder of this piece will address the involvement of Irish and American diplomats in this unsavory international trade, and the willingness of politicians and foreign service staff in both countries to sustain an international system which often endorsed “forced disappearance”. Moreover, these atrocities having been discovered because of the revelations from sites such as at Tuam and Bessborough, the international authorities in the USA and Ireland have actively prevented discovery of this international trade and have concealed the crucial role of the diplomatic service.

It is unclear to what extent the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs actively conspired in the circumvention of international law and thereby knowingly facilitated the diaspora of “disappeared” in post-WW2 Ireland. However, the passport records of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs reveal a barely concealed network of *de facto* child trafficking. Passports were issued at sometimes astonishing speed and with a confusing array of names almost at the command of Church-run adoption agencies.

US and Irish diplomats, the aviation industry and “mother and baby homes” were part of an elaborate network which existed outside the exegesis of official law. It was as if an alternative international order existed, sanctioned by the Pope, and which required a very minimal compliance with the normal procedures of international order. To dispatch each child on its journey from Ireland to a new life in America, at a time when the US was solidifying its international borders, required a high level of compliance by both jurisdictions. Officials in Washington and Dublin cannot but have been aware that this was, in effect, an international adoption network between America and the “old country”.

One may reflect on the sad history of the Mother and Baby homes in Ireland as we are confronted with the legacy of personal suffering and face the realities of enormous financial compensation, presenting a burden on the Irish taxpayer for decades to come. In this environment the moral repugnance of the Irish Free State and its hypocritical stance towards unmarried pregnancy has left the nation with a heavy cost and a painful conscience. Internationally, it also exposes diplomacy, directly or indirectly, in the service of a grisly international trade, as exposed in “Philomena”, Stephen Frears’ Oscar-nominated film.

One might therefore assume that over such a period of time, lessons would be learned and a cost paid in eternal vigilance on such matters as personal morality and human trafficking. Sadly, Ireland remains an oft-overlooked destination country for women, men, and children trafficked for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. In 2018 and 2019 the United States Department of State’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (OMCTP) noted that Ireland failed, “the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.”

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It is as if an international conspiracy of silence condemned the island to repetition of the sins of its past. The same variables of international child adoption, although increasingly from third countries to Ireland, still today cast a dark shadow on Ireland's contemporary human rights performance. Nowadays we have much stricter measures of child protection and procedures to deter malfeasance in public office. However this dark shadow in Ireland's diplomatic past and which questions the credentials of the Irish-American relationship, is a challenge for today.

Diplomats in every country must be vigilant in ensuring the highest standards of policy where potential child trafficking could be missed. There is compelling evidence from the OMCTP that Ireland has work to do to strengthen its current procedures. This historical narrative of a dark chapter in Ireland's immigration history is compelling but also has resonance for today. The denial of a respectful burial to the dead of the Mother and Baby Homes suggests that a prevalent public morality and the stigma of procreation out of wedlock, was given precedence over the most basic acts of humanity. That Irish-American diplomacy contributed to an elaborate network of child adoption casts a dark shadow over what is otherwise hailed as a formative period in the relationship between the two nations.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.