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A Review of Suffer the Little Children by Mary Rafferty and Eoin O'Sullivan (1999) Dublin, New Island Books

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Editors Note:

Paula Hutchinson is a mature student (a student over the age of 23 in the Irish education system) in year one of the National Diploma in Applied Social Studies in Social Care at the Waterford Institute of Technology. One of the 2000 class assignments was to provide a critique of any publication of choice. Paula chose to review the controversial book *Suffer Little Children* and wrote an excellent paper which, I felt, might serve as encouragement for other students around Ireland (or, indeed, abroad) should they like to consider submissions to journals of this kind. As an editorial board, we very much welcome articles from students of CYC and Social Care courses, and, of course, material from practitioners. I have maintained the format of Paula's article, making only stylistic changes.

C. Niall McElwee.
Editor.

A Review of *Suffer The Little Children* by Mary Raftery and Eoin O' Sullivan. (1999).

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Introduction

> *"The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of childcare, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and sexually abused"* (De Mause, 1991).

In April and May 1999, R.T.E. broadcast a three-part documentary called *States of Fear*. Written, produced and directed by Mary Raftery, it was a powerful and shocking series detailing the systematic abuse suffered by generations of Irish children in the State institutions and religious-run schools purported to protect them. It opened up to public

scrutiny the shameful secrets that lay buried for so long just beneath the surface of a deeply repressive Catholic society, in particular the period from the 1940's to the 1970's and beyond. It caused a national outcry, opening the flood-gates for hundreds of people to tell of their experiences in newspapers and on radio and television, and led to the setting up of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. It eventually led the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) to issue a public apology on behalf of the government.

From Television to Book

Suffer the Little Children, the inside story of Ireland's Industrial Schools, is a further development to this story. With Dr Eoin O'Sullivan, consultant on States of Fear, and authority in the area of Industrial Schools, Mary Raftery digs even deeper into the 'brutal' history of the Industrial Schools. Not only does it tell the stories of the individual children who experienced them, even more shockingly it shows how the State and individuals within the Religious Orders hand in hand, carelessly and often knowingly, destroyed the lives of countless numbers of these children. Sadly, it also shows how the deeply religious Catholic society of the time allowed this to happen in front of its eyes.

> *"Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not : for of such is the Kingdom of God"* (Bible)

In my opinion, never has a book had such an apt title. Even without knowing the subheading 'The inside story of Ireland's Industrial Schools', the title *Suffer the Little Children* gives the reader a very clear indication as to the contents waiting inside. We know it to be from a Biblical quote, therefore we could expect the Church to be involved. But do we take the quote in its original context, to love and care for the children? Or do we take it to mean its literal translation? Unfortunately Austin Clarke's poem on the very first page leaves us in no doubt that suffering was exactly what was in store for the more than 100,000 children detained in Ireland's Industrial Schools from the late 1800's to the late 1900's.

> *". . . . . the screaming little boy*
> *and girl were quickly, for the public good,*
> *committed to Industrial School . . .*
> *. . . . . both safely held beyond the reach*
> *Of mother, father. We destroy*
> *families . . . ."* (Austin Clarke, 1963)

It seemed pertinent that the day I began reading *Suffer the Little Children*, 5th of October 2000, was the day that the Government finally announced that it was to establish a Compensation Tribunal for abuse victims and that the Tribunal will run in tandem with the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, chaired by Ms Justice Laffoy. The Laffoy Commission was set up following public outrage over the abuses revealed in the States of Fear (Irish Times, 5/10/00). For a society that for so long failed to acknowledge what was happening in its midst, and for even longer denied its own responsibilities, this is a huge step. One that can only go towards making a newer, more open and informed society as it steps out of the darkness and repression in which it existed for generations. It may help our future children. Sadly it cannot undo what has already been done.

Evaluation

> *". . . the institutionalisation of little children, housed in great big factory-like places, where individuality has been, and is being, snuffed out with no development of the personality . . . and where little children became a great army of child slavery in workshops, making money for the institutions which gave them a little food, a little clothing, very little recreation and a doubtful education"* (Flanagan, 1947).

On my first reading of this remarkable book, it was the testimonies of the survivors of these institutions that made the strongest impression on me. It would take an incredibly hard heart not to be moved at these tales of unrelenting sadness and cruelty, which immediately begs the question, what was the matter with the hearts of the Irish nuns and brothers of the time? The circumstances and situations of each story was different, but the threads that joined each story remained constant. Hunger and cold were repeated themes, along with fear, loneliness, endless beatings, sexual abuse. Children were routinely punished for everything and nothing, completely and utterly at the mercy of the whims of those who were supposed to care for them. They grew up in places where love and respect were totally denied them. Brothers and sisters seem to have been deliberately sent to institutions as far away from each other as possible, often not even knowing of each other's existence until years later. Children were assigned numbers in place of names, a practice that only served to dehumanise them further, more like the system of a concentration camp than a supposed childcare institution. Small children were consistently humiliated and degraded for the simple fact of bed-wetting! All this done in the name of God! . . .

Sourcing Children

Children were put into these institutions for many different reasons. Some were true orphans, but these were actually in the minority. This is an interesting fact, as these institutions were generally known in their local areas as orphanages. As described in Paddy Doyle's book: "I used to hear people refer to me as 'one of the children from the orphanage' which was the phrase locals used to soften the brutal reality of the Industrial School in their midst" (Doyle, 1988).

Most children actually had one or both parents still alive, but deemed unable to cope, through poverty, 'lack of proper guardianship', alcoholism etc. Many were born to unmarried mothers, into a culture in which "contraception was illegal and sex outside marriage severely censored. Girls who had babies out of wedlock were condemned by their neighbours, and often by their families" (Arnold & Laskey, 1985).

As a result, these children seem to have been treated even worse if that were possible, than the others. Still others, mostly boys, were incarcerated by the Courts for relatively minor offences, such as petty thieving or truancy. The irony and uselessness of such practices seem to have been lost, as shown in the Gerard Fogarty Case in Chapter Nine.

"I never learned anything in Glin. They locked me up there to make me learn, and then they never taught me anything. It didn't make any sense" (Raftery & O'Sullivan, 1999). Story after story bears witness to the fact that huge numbers of these children reached adulthood barely able to read and write. Tragically, many left these institutions so emotionally damaged that they were unable to cope with 'normal' life. For the stories contained within these pages

go far beyond the limits of 'ordinary' cruelty or neglect and into a realm of savagery and sadism. How else could you possibly describe a regime that routinely brutalised so many extremely vulnerable children? Descriptions such as 'mini-concentration camp' and 'hell on earth' are used by survivors. They also give countless examples of those who were told of such abuses either refusing to believe, or deliberately choosing to ignore.

"It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing, for evil to triumph" (Burke)

"... a society's abdication of responsibility to a child" (Doyle, 1988)

My Second Reading of the Book: Shattering the Myths

On reading the book a second time, I was both amazed and appalled at the facts and figures as presented by the authors. They are to be commended on the depth and breadth of their research. One by one they shatter the myths that served to protect the institutions and its so-called guardians, and also the society within which they were allowed to operate without question. The first myth was that the children were charity-cases, looked after by the nuns and brothers because nobody else would – the reality was that the Religious Orders were more than adequately paid by the State for this service, especially compared to the general living standards of the time. The entire system was in fact, regulated and funded by the Department of Education, who handed over complete control regarding the running of the institutions to the religious, without any inspection procedures in place. The fact that the Department paid a grant per child rather than an overall sum to each institution, only served as an added incentive for them to take in as many children as possible.

The second myth, that the children were all 'orphans' was guaranteed to gain more sympathy and generosity from the general community that if they were perceived simply to be the offspring of the poor. I was interested, and appalled to read that there were, in fact, several 'real' orphanages in Ireland, mostly fee-charging and catering for the children of the middle-classes. The religious were maintaining rigid class divisions in how these vulnerable children were being treated. 'One law for the children of the rich, another for the children of the poor'.

One of the most damaging myths concerned the Industrial Schools for older boys. It was generally thought that these boys were guilty of criminal acts – in fact only a minority of boys were and these were mostly of a very minor nature. "although the purpose of Industrial Schools was to meet the needs of orphaned, destitute and abandoned children, they were always linked in the public mind with reformatories and criminal activities" (Arnold & Laskey, 1985). The very fact of having attended such a school was enough to blight the future of any boy in the Irish society of the time, and instilled a great sense of shame in those who came through it.

Of course, the biggest myth of all, and one that is still being used up to the present time, is that nobody knew that all this abuse was happening. While the general public would not have been aware of the extent of the abuse, it was common knowledge that such institutions were seen as very unpleasant places – misbehaving children were often threatened with the local institution. And at a higher level, a lot more was known of the true nature of these places. Going back as far as the 1940's, a Department of Education Official stated that one individual would be in prison for her neglect of children if she hadn't been a nun. The Christian Brothers themselves ignored the statements from their founder Edmund Ignatius

Rice, that corporal punishment was wrong. From the 1940's onwards, articles in the Irish papers condemning the harsh systems of Industrial Schools were ignored. The reality was that putting large numbers of boys and girls into these institutions was the easiest and cheapest option for the State. The Religious Orders involved made huge amounts of money from the children, firstly from the combined grants received from the State; secondly through providing for the children the barest amount of food and clothing, thus making huge savings; and thirdly by using these children in effect as 'slave labour' on the large farms, workshops and laundries that they ran as very successful businesses. The quality and scale of the buildings they left behind are testimony to the vast wealth at their disposal.

Another interesting and leading fact to emerge from this book is that while the Department of Education finally provided the authors with complete access to their files on Industrial Schools, up to the present time the Church is still refusing to allow any access to its files. One must only assume that it has much to hide.

> *"For far too long our collective excuse was that we didn't know, but we might have known much earlier had we treated children seriously . . . . we could have recognised sexual abuse long before if we had given children a voice and listened to it"* (Freeman, 1998/99).

Conclusion

While the above quote refers to England and Wales, it is equally applicable to the Irish situation. Of course, the emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children was, and is, not confined only to Ireland. Another horrifying fact to emerge from this book is that Irish Christian Brothers also abused and terrorised children in Industrial Schools set up in Canada and Australia. More and more stories are also coming forth, of the prevalence of child abuse and the resulting cover-ups, within the wider community. There are many examples, such as the Brendan Smyth case, and the extraordinary story of Sophia McColgan, which must make us all question how this abuse can be so widespread in a supposedly Christian culture.

With the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, and with all the media reports on the issues involved, it is to be hoped that abuses such as happened in the past, will not happen again. Unfortunately, as we are told in the final chapters of this book, change can be very slow to happen. The Kennedy Report of 1970 thoroughly condemned the Irish Industrial School system, and in effect sounded the beginning of the end of 100 years of unquestioned control of childcare in Ireland. It made 13 major recommendations, designed to create a modern childcare system. Sadly, the reality is that examples such as Trudder House and Madonna House show that abuse within the system continued unabated. According to the authors "In essence, little has changed since the era of the Industrial Schools of the 1940's and 1950's".

Suffer the Little Children is incredibly detailed in its research into the catalogue of cover-up upon cover-up that has gone on in specific schools in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's. While it is the first book to do such wide-ranging research into all the Industrial Schools of Ireland, it also draws attention to a much earlier book – *Children of the Poor Clares, the Story of an Irish Orphanage*, published in 1985. While this book concentrated on only one school, St Joseph's Industrial School in Cavan, it held it up as a 'typical example' and was very clear in its condemnation of the whole system. Its format is very similar to *Suffer the Little Children*, with facts and figures about the Industrial Schools presented in tandem with the individual

stories of those who experienced it. Although a much smaller volume of work, it is also a powerful story and should have received equal attention in its day as *Suffer the Little Children* today. Perhaps if it had, things would have changed more rapidly for the children of the Industrial Schools, and I am satisfied that by including it in this book, the authors acknowledge its own relevance and worth.

A More Personalised Commentary

Having read this book in depth, I am very pleased already had, what I would consider, a healthy disrespect for the Catholic Church in Ireland. Equally, I can understand the difficulties that older generations have in accepting these facts. How can one reconcile deeply held religious beliefs with such appalling abuse of power? It is here that the balance of the book is clear, for along with the cruelty, it allows for the stories of those nuns and brothers who were not bad. Unfortunately they were not able to stand up to those who were, and therein lies the ultimate tragedy. While those who were the most evil were probably in the minority, they seem to have had the most power to abuse. How was this allowed to happen? For me, this is one area of the book that could have been questioned more deeply, and perhaps it's only weakness that it did not do so. If we are ever to truly understand how and why, we must analyse and question the whole format of the Catholic Church in the Irish culture, and how something with such a Christian ethos could have become something so twisted and warped.

There is so much more that one could say about this thought-provoking book, but really the best thing I could do would be to encourage as many students and practitioners as possible to read it and come to their own conclusions. I will conclude my own observations on the book with a poem from one of my favourite books of poetry, *The Rattle Bag* edited by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes.

Children

Children sleep at night,
Children never wake up
When morning comes.
Only the old ones wake up.
Old Trouble is always awake.

Children can't see over their eyes.
Children can't hear beyond their ears.
Children can't know outside of their heads.

The old ones see.
The old ones hear.
The old ones know.
The old ones are old.

(Laura Riding)

Note

1. In reviewing Mary Raftery's and Eoin O'Sullivan's book, I have chosen to look at it through very specific eyes – as a first-year student, mature in years but inexperienced in this area; very specifically as a mother, having spent the last fifteen years bringing up my two daughters; and, relevant to the topics covered in the book, as one whose entire primary and secondary education was in an Irish convent school from the mid 1960's to the late 1970's. This last point would make it difficult for me to have a purely objective view on the subject, so this review will be, of necessity a personal and reflective view rather than a critique.

2. As one who attended a convent school for all of her formative years, I feel in a better position to understand the psyche of the Irish religious than the younger students of my year. Like my own daughters, many of them will have had limited contact with the religious in their education, with perhaps only the Principal the only nun remaining. They would certainly find it difficult to understand how different it was in the '60's and '70's.

   I know first hand how narrow and repressive the experience was – the rigid enforcement of rules, the absolute insistence on blind obedience, the ever-present threat of corporal punishment. We were incredibly well-behaved children – we were afraid to be anything else, and we were the lucky ones, with good homes and families to return to each day.

   Academic excellence was the yardstick by which everyone was measured – and God help those that didn't reach these standards, they didn't get much help or sympathy. I acknowledge that some were brilliant teachers, but at the expense of any individual thinking or creativity. And I can remember several of my peers in the mid to late 70's disappearing for months at a time, to suddenly reappear back at school, slimmer sadder girls, and not being allowed to ask why. We hadn't heard of Magdalen Homes then.

3. I would be keen to discover why the religious institutions had such a violent reaction to bed-wetting. It is, after all, usually a relatively simple problem of childhood, more often than not solved by kind words, reassurance and a quick change of sheets. That the religious used it to further punish and humiliate already confused and bewildered children is beyond my comprehension. The fact that persistent bed-wetting is mentioned in so many of the stories, and in other books such as *The God Squad*, only shows further the emotional trauma of so many children, separated from their families, thrown into harsh, strange surroundings.

   As a mother, the image of children being forced to hold wet sheets above their heads in front of the others as punishment for their "crime" is barbaric. It was surely thought up by a cruel and sadistic mind – for what other reason than to humiliate? Certainly it didn't solve the problem for the unfortunate children, and would only have exacerbated it.

   I remember reading bed-time stories to my girls when they were little, before kissing them goodnight. What horrors must the night have held for the youngsters in these institutions in their rows and rows of lonely beds?

4. Of course, it has been argued that we cannot judge that period of Irish history by our modern standards of today, and up to a point it is a very valid argument. Conditions in Ireland particularly in the 1940's and '50's were in general very bad, especially for the lower classes, with widespread poverty and disease. Life expectancy was low, infant

mortality high; physical punishment of children was the norm in national school as well as the home, and accepted throughout society; and a strict Catholicism informed every aspect of daily life from the cradle to the grave.

But while we may make allowances for poorer standards in the daily care of the children relative to the times, such as food or clothing or education, or even try to understand the neglect through ignorance of the emotional needs of the children – I cannot accept that the combination of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of generations of children, and the prevalence and severity of it, could be excusable in any era, past or present. I believe that each person is responsible for their own behaviour, irrespective of the circumstances or situations of the time. Each person makes their own choices, for good or for evil. And those that are standing by make their own choices too, whether they choose to see or to turn away. I cannot believe that human nature was so different back then that people didn't know in their hearts that what was happening and being allowed to happen was not right.

5. Suffer the Little Children is an incredibly detailed piece of research and must have been a very significant undertaking for it authors. It has set in motion some way to right the wrongs of the past and for this reason alone I would find it hard to criticise it. Perhaps because I am so new to the whole area and felt so overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the evidence of its 400 or so pages, I would not even feel qualified to begin to criticise it in any serious way. Others haven't felt so inhibited and there were several criticisms following the publication. However, I feel the authors refuted these points more than adequately in their response in The *Irish Times* (13/1/00) and far more articulately than I could here.

   Harry Ferguson also criticises them in his letter to the *Irish Times* (19/1/00) and his takes on a more personal form of criticism, directed at the authors themselves as well as their book. I acknowledge that his opinion is by definition going to be far more educated and informed than mine and I hardly feel qualified to argue against him. But, I feel that he is being particularly harsh in his criticism of the authors. That the documentary series and the book were both enormous personal achievements, given the countless hours of personal testimonies and legal research that must have been involved, not to mention the intensity of being so closely involved with those whose stories were being told, perhaps they can be forgiven for being overly sensitive in their reaction.

6. Finally, it is only as a mature student that I have at last been able to step outside of my own limited personal experiences and gain some better understanding of the broader picture. There has been a huge learning curve involved in a relatively short period of time and I look forward with anticipation and some trepidation to the next few years continuing this way.

   Having been through so many years of practical childrearing, I feel I have a far greater understanding of the concepts involved in the study of childhood and social care. The study of the history of childhood, through the works of Aries and de Mause has been fascinating in itself, to realise that 'childhood' itself is such a modern 'invention' and not as I would have taken for granted, a natural or essential stage of life. It also paints a rather horrifying picture of the level of child abuse that goes back to the earliest recorded times and in so many cultures and societies.

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This two day international conference will run from the 8th to the 9th of October 2001. The venue will be The Boyne Valley Hotel, Drogheda, Co. Louth.

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This conference will be of interest to all professionals who work closely with children in crisis, in both the residential and community setting. It will adopt an holistic approach to the care of children and develops the key issue of reintegration as a crucial part of a continuum of care. The target audience includes Social Workers, Probation and Welfare Officers, Child Care Managers and Practitioners, Teachers, School Attendance Officers, Juvenile Liaison Officers, Community Groups, Students of Third Level Courses and other representatives of health, education and justice.

Keynote speakers are expected to include C. Niall McElwee, President Irish Association of Social Care Educators/Editor Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies -- & --Dr. Thom Garfat, TransFormAction Consulting and Training, Quebec, Canada.

Places will be limited so early registration is essential (limited student places available at a reduced rate).

It is anticipated that the rate will be in the region of IEP 195 – to include access to workshops and plenary sessions, all meals, social activities, gala dinner on the second night, transfers to accommodation, conference pack etc. Reduced rate accommodation at either the venue or other local hotels can be arranged.

If interested in registering as a delegate or presenting a paper/running a workshop at the event or being kept informed of on-going developments please contact John Digney, Project Manager, Oberstown Boys Centre, Lusk, Co. Dublin. Ph: 00353-01-8438600.

Further details will be posted closer to the event.