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# Lying unwept and unburied: on the role of gravesides in nation-building

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## ABSTRACT

In his seminal work *Inventing Ireland* (1998) Declan Kiberd states that the movement for national independence imagined the Irish people as an historic community. That self-image, which was shaped well ahead of the dawn of modern nationalism and the nation-state, relies on a notion of identity that is rarely straightforward and given. Rather, its construction and evolution over time involves negotiation and exchange.

Taking our cue from Kiberd's notion of the need to acknowledge the historicity of the Irish community, we want to engage with an issue, which haunts the self-image and self-definition of the collective and the individual: the memory of those lying unwept and unburied. In this connection, we will first refer to the use of the graveside by a political and rhetorical tradition, which eulogises the revolutionary martyr and then address and elaborate on the graves, which have not yet settled: those of the women and children who were victims of systemic neglect and abuse.

KEYWORDS: nation-state, identity, official memory, victims, redress

Monday, November 25th, 2024 was the date when, as published in the daily newspaper *Irish Examiner* (O'Reilly, 2024), preliminary works started at the site where hundreds of babies are believed to be buried in Tuam, Co Galway. In preparation for a full excavation due to begin early in 2025 this action came as a long awaited and extremely complex operation to identify remains buried there. It is planned that these actions will lead to DNA matches with relatives and former residents of the home, thus paving the way for proper and respectful burials.

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But it was ten years ago, in 2014, that the historian Catherine Corless made public her shocking discovery: 796 babies died between 1925 and 1961 in the Tuam home, in County Galway in the province of Connaught in western Ireland. This mother and baby home, like other 18 suchlike institutions, were run and financed by the Catholic Church, more specifically in the Tuam case, by the Bon Secours Sisters, in concert with the Irish State. There was an apology<sup>1</sup> by Taoiseach Enda Kenny before the Dáil over the crime against humanity committed against women and children in Tuam. The Irish Prime Minister labelled the mass grave containing human remains of babies in Tuam as a "chamber of horrors" while he claimed that "[no] nuns broke into our homes to kidnap our children - we gave them up to what we convinced ourselves was that nuns care. We gave them up maybe to spare the the savagery of gossip, the wink and the elbow language of delight - in which the 'holier than thou's' were particularly fluent. And we gave them up because of our perverse, in fact morbid, relationship with what you call respectability" (*Irish Examiner*, 2017, paras. 15, 16). Paradoxically, Kenny refused to address calls to extend the remit of the inquiry so that up to 180 other institutions were investigated.

The blunt and outrageous fact about this part of Irish history involving the children of unmarried women who were housed at the Tuam mother and baby home is, as Corless said to *The Guardian* correspondent in 2023, that "[t]hey are two-feet down from where we are standing,". No matter what harmful process deteriorated the remains ("The bones have mingled together and water got in and thrashed them around."), Corless forcefully contended, [b]ut they're there" (Carroll, 2023, para. 2).

This, then, is the unpalatable truth about this Galway town: for decades, there existed in Tuam a home, which housed countless unmarried pregnant women and put the remains of about 800 dead babies and children in a disused subterranean septic tank.

Corless resisted efforts to leave the remains in place and to memorialise the site with just a plaque. She protested, "Let them rest in peace? It was a sewage facility – get them out of there. Let's expose the raw truth of what happened. You have to unearth the whole place to undo the damage. The people of Ireland need to know what happened" (Carroll, 2023, para. 15).

In his seminal work *Inventing Ireland* (1998) Declan Kiberd states that the movement for national independence imagined the Irish people as an historic community. That self-image, which was shaped well ahead of the dawn of modern nationalism and the nation-state, relies on a notion of identity that is

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1 In 2013, prompted by the publication of the McAleese report, the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, had formally apologised on behalf of the state for its role in the Magdalene laundries. Despite the investigation, apology, and promise of redress, the Irish response was insufficient and failed to meet the standards of international law. In its 2017 report the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) outlined its concerns surrounding the incomplete nature of the McAleese document. For more details see McGettrick et al. (2021).

rarely straightforward and given. Rather, its construction and evolution over time involves negotiation and exchange.

Taking our cue from Kiberd's notion of the need to acknowledge the historicity of the Irish community, we want to engage with the issue, which still haunts the self-image and self-definition of the collective and the individual: the memory of those lying unwept and unburied. In this connection, we will first refer to the use of the graveside by a political and rhetorical tradition, which eulogises the revolutionary martyr. We will then go on to address and elaborate on the graves, which have not yet settled: those of the women and children who were victims of systemic neglect and abuse.

With reference to the vexed question of modern Irish history, Margaret M. Scull points out that it "at times, remains trapped in the political, only surveying high politics through government archives" (Scull, 2020, as cited in Houlihan, 2021, p. 40). The relations interweaving memory and history, as two interdependent manners of interpellating and recovering a tragic past are undoubtedly difficult and it is this very complexity that enables to glean the fact that history, always beset by pressing political and social needs, only partially reconstructs and decodifies memory.

In this regard, the traumatic memory of events such as the one in Tuam ought to be assessed and considered in terms of the larger scale social remembering by the nation. As Oona Frawley (2011) wisely proposes in the "Introduction" to *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity*, a reassessment is due to "finally awaken from what James Joyce cannily called "the nightmare" of Irish history". This act of critical reappraisal is one in which the Irish past is perceived "not as an etched-stone memorial without change, but as a shifting subject that depends on present positioning and, to a large degree, on the revelation of and subsequent lightening of trauma" (p. xv).

2015 was the year when Booker Prize-winning novelist Anne Enright gave a lecture entitled "Giving Voice: Antigone and the Dishonoured Dead" at University College Cork as part of her role as Ireland's inaugural Fiction Laureate. More precisely the date was November 19th. The lecture was then published as an article under the title "Antigone in Galway". Anne Enright on the dishonoured dead" in the *London Review of Books* on December 17th. Its publication in this highly regarded magazine where discomfiting thoughts can be articulated and where there is room for the airing thorny arguments was, as novelist and journalist Mary Morrissy<sup>2</sup> (2015) concedes, to be welcomed. Yet, at the same time, as Morrissy bitterly points out, this also "speaks of another kind of burial, in an English literary graveyard" (para. 8). Morrissy's gloomy prediction was, however, to be disproved in 2019 when, due to the raging topicality of the matters addressed, Enright's essay was reprinted as the first

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<sup>2</sup> Award-winning Mary Morrissy is the author of four novels, *Mother of Pearl*, *The Pretender*, *The Rising of Bella Casey* and most recently, *Penelope Unbound* (2023). She is also a journalist and a member of Aosdána,

piece in a collection of miscellaneous writings titled *No Authority: Writings from the Laureateship* (2019).

The title, "Antigone in Galway," might seem misleading but Enright dexteously resorts to Greek tragedy and brings to bear her informed and critical insight on the Irish situation. As Fiona Macintosh (2011) holds, there is nothing unique in turning to the classics to illuminate current concerns and needs. If one recollects the varied refigurations of Sophocles's tragedy which appeared since the mid-1980s onwards, one might be beguiled into thinking Enright is following in the footsteps of his fellow compatriots, Tom Paulin, Aidan Carl Matthews, Brendan Kennelly, Pat Murphy, Seamus Heaney, Conall Morrison, and Owen McCafferty (p. 90). In a country where ritual lamentation and public burial are live and central traditions, Antigone had served as an embodiment of feminine resistance to colonial oppression and patriarchy. Among these figurations Antigone as a nationalist heroine and potential martyr had prevailed; also, the Deirdre/Antigone composite figure had emerged against the foil of the fights to introduce abortion and divorce in the eighties (p. 97)

But in Enright's essay the classical *Antigone* is reappropriated and imbued with new pregnant senses of momentous import in Ireland at the time. As Mary Morrissy (2015) acutely observes, Enright duly extols the local historian Catherine Corless and the late journalist, Mary Raftery, both full of unflagging determination and courage in their efforts to shine a light in the darkest corners of Irish society. Yet, attention to these outstanding figures, Morrissy asserts, does not make Enright veer away from her main topic of concern: the infants buried at the Tuam site.

The essay's first paragraph engages with the duties owed to the national heroes of the Republic: exhuming the bodies of Thomas Kent or Roger Casement and their reinterment, that is, giving them proper burial in the consecrated ground of the nation. But in the rest of her piece she artfully and critically plies her pen to tie up the yarn strands over the need to exhume the little ones dumped into the sewage in the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam. Such a commitment on Enright's part lays bare the political use of the body in the narrative of nation-building and puts forward the collective need to come to terms with those unsettling unpalatable truths.

If, as Enright (2015) claims, Irish graveyards are, above all, family places and the graveside was a rare opportunity to speak from the heart of the Irish rhetorical tradition, she here brings to the readers attention the unmarked burial plots of the missing dead. The preeminence of the burial rite and the grave plot to bond things together takes in Ireland a very peculiar and unique turn, Enright says, "Would you like to be buried with my people?" is not a marriage proposal you might hear in another country, even as a joke." (para. 3)

2021 was the year when Claire Keegan published *Small Things like These*, a novella about the dilemma faced by a middle-aged working man whose life and history bears the indelible mark of being a illegitimate son in a community

where the Church, still in 1985, rules over the dead and the living. Apart from including a note pertaining to the bleak history of the Magdalen laundries, Keegan sees fit to add an excerpt from the 1916 proclamation of the Irish Republic before the novel begins:

‘The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.’

Excerpt from ‘The Proclamation of the Irish Republic’, 1916 (Keegan, 2021)

At the crux of the birth of the Republic and the nation-building process are, then and now, the children. Their right to be fairly treated and their right to be given what is to them due: a proper and respectful burial in the consecrated ground of the Irish nation.

“Antigone in Galway” (2015, 2019) came to give voice to the dishonoured dead. Today in 2024, as the excavation works continue, they cry to be heard, as yet dishonoured, without redress or compassion for them or their families. Regretfully, Enright’s plea reverberates across The Republic of Ireland, lest the nation dares to forget.

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