

## Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home (1925–1961)

Between 1925 and 1961, a Roman Catholic order of nuns called the Bon Secours Sisters operated the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home, or the Home, an institution where unmarried pregnant women gave birth in Tuam, Ireland. Pregnant women who delivered their infants at the Home were required to work at the Home for no less than one year without pay. The Irish government and the Catholic Church endorsed the Mother and Baby Home as a means to limit the number of children born out of wedlock by discouraging women from getting pregnant before marriage. During the Home's thirty-six years of operation, the nuns reported that almost 800 children died in their care. In 2015, researchers discovered a tomb of 796 infant and child skeletons in a septic tank underneath where the Home once stood. The acceptance and use of Mother and Baby Homes revealed the way Ireland treated pregnant women in the twentieth century.

The Bon Secours Sisters were a congregation of Roman Catholic nuns who officially assembled in Paris, France, in 1824. A majority of the Sisters were trained nurses or midwives. The term, *bon secours*, translated from French, means good will. The Bon Secours Sisters' original motto was good will to all, and they sought to provide efficient nursing care to the less fortunate, particularly those of low socioeconomic status. In the mid-1800s, the Bon Secours Sisters established convents outside of France in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United States, the Sisters traveled to Maryland, beginning a convent which, in 1919, became the Bon Secours Hospital. As of 2018, that hospital still operates in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1925, the Bon Secours Sisters opened the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Ireland.

Institutions for unwed pregnant women and their infants, such as the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home, were prevalent across Ireland during the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. According to researcher Catherine Corless, there was a significant stigma in Ireland against unmarried mothers. Many citizens of Ireland practiced Catholicism, a religion that required women to marry before becoming pregnant. Irish citizens considered infants born out of wedlock illegitimate or bastard children. In addition, the government of Ireland passed an 1841 law called the Offenses Against the Person Act, which made abortion under any circumstance illegal in Ireland. The law ordered that women who received abortions be imprisoned for the rest of their lives. Therefore, women who became pregnant outside of marriage had few options.

The Bon Secours Sisters, a group of Roman Catholic nuns, began operating the Mother and Baby Home following the Home's earlier use as a military barracks. The building that became the Mother and Baby Home was designed by architect George Wilkinson in 1841 to be used as a workhouse, able to house over eight hundred people. In Ireland in the nineteenth century, workhouses were used to house those who were unable to support themselves financially. Those people exchanged free labor for a place to stay and daily meals. Many of those people were chronically or terminally ill or had a disability. In 1846, as Ireland's Great Famine was occurring, the workhouse opened its doors. According to historian Peter Higginbotham, the building contained an infirmary for the ill and, as he phrased, an idiot's ward for those with disabilities. After decades of military conflict, the building was left to the Bon Secours Sisters to open an institution for unmarried mothers.

In 1925, the Bon Secours Sisters opened the Home located in Tuam, Ireland. Led by Mother Hortense McNamara, the Home had dormitories for pregnant women and for those who had given birth. The Home had separate dormitories for infants and children and the nuns separated the infant from its mother upon birth. Mothers were required to stay without pay at the Mother and Baby Home for one year following the birth of their infants, working to keep the institution clean and to care for the infants and children. If a woman did not want to stay, she would have to procure an amount of

money corresponding to one hundred Euros as of 2018 to give to the nuns, though that was not an option for many women whose families had disowned them due to their pregnancies. Oftentimes, following their one year commitment at the Mother and Baby Home, the mothers would be sent to a Magdalene laundry, which were Catholic-run labor facilities that sought to reform women. However, much like the Home, Magdalene laundries were often retrospectively accused of conducting unsafe and dangerous labor practices. In 1927, the Catholic Church and Ireland's state authorities both officially endorsed the Mother and Baby Home as a reasonable solution to reduce the number of illegitimate children in Ireland. For each mother and infant in the home, the Tuam County Council paid the nuns a small weekly sum.

Later interviews with residents reported the living conditions at the Home. Corless conducted research into claims made about the safety and cleanliness of the Home's facilities, which enabled her to document former residents' stories. Many women remembered the high retaining walls as they were driven, oftentimes forcibly, by their family members or local clergymen, to deliver their infants in the Mother and Baby Home's maternity ward. Survivors interviewed in the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* described the nuns as inflicting brutal punishments without cause. When interviewed as adults, the tenants who lived at the Home as children described heavy, amber curtains covering long windows that spanned the length of an entire corridor. The residents who lived in the surrounding village of Tuam, Ireland, detailed the sound of the students' clogs as the children from the Mother and Baby Home lined up to attend local primary schools in town.

After the women gave birth to their infants in the Mother and Baby Home's maternity ward, the nuns immediately removed the infant from the room to separate it from the woman. Though the nuns raised the infants in the same facility where the mothers worked, the nuns did not inform the women of which infants belonged to whom. Researchers Buckley and McGregor claim that the Bon Secours Sisters conducted illegal adoptions of the infants and children prior to Ireland's 1952 Domestic Adoption Legalization Act, which only allowed for adoption within Ireland's country borders. Following the passage of that act, the researchers claim that the Sisters still conducted illegal adoptions, sending many children to the United States in exchange for large sums of money. Over 2000 children were sent to the United States from Ireland between 1950 and 1980. Those adoptions were done without the mothers' consent.

Many infants died due to unsafe and unsanitary living conditions at the Mother and Baby Home. Some researchers argue that due to the cramped living conditions and the country's lack of assistance to help contain diseases, there was an increased risk of children spreading communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, influenza, and measles. The nuns registered the infants' and children's deaths with the Tuam City Council death register, providing the deceased's name, age, and cause of death. The nuns also often posted ads in the local newspaper looking for commissions for small sized coffins.

Some reports found that over 800 infants aged from birth to three years of age died within the Mother and Baby Home's thirty-six-year existence. For example, Ireland's infant mortality rate in 1969 was between 20 and 30 infant deaths per one thousand live births. In 1925, the year the Home opened, seven children died from communicable diseases such as whooping cough or measles. Twenty-four children died in 1932. Thirty-two children died in 1933. While the diseases that killed the infants and children in the Home varied, many of the children also died due to severe malnourishment. After forty children had died in the home in 1940, Ireland's government sent out an inspector to examine the living conditions of the Home. That inspector described infants living in the nursery as emaciated, with open abscesses and bloated stomachs. The year that report was finalized, in 1947, fifty-two children died at the Mother and Baby Home. In 1961, the Galway City Council of Tuam and the Department of Local Government and Public Health decided to close the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home. For over a decade, the building was left vacant until a majority of the property was bulldozed.

Corless conducted research on the Mother and Baby Home through the 2000s, which led to the discovery of a mass infant grave. After the Mother and Baby Home was destroyed, real estate companies built large estates upon the property and estate owners took charge of the remaining structures, which included a crypt that had been located under the Home. Corless was the granddaughter of a Mother and Baby Home survivor, meaning her mother had been born to an unwed

woman who was sent to the Home. After her mother's death, Corless began contributing to the local newspaper on stories of the Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene laundries. In an interview with New York Times writer, Dan Barry, Corless claimed that the mysteries associated with her grandmother's life led her to begin questioning what really occurred in the Mother and Baby Homes. In the 2000s, Corless began researching where the deceased 796 infants, who had been registered through the county, were buried. After talking with the estate owners, she learned that the bodies of the deceased children were stored in a septic tank that sat beneath the Mother and Baby Home. The corpses were excavated in 2015.

The Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home served as an attempt to reduce the number of illegitimate children born out of wedlock in Ireland. Despite those intentions, some historians argue that many of the infant and child deaths at the Home could have been prevented. In a 2017 New York Times letter to the editor, pediatrician Daniel Levy asserted that many of the children died from diseases which could have been treated with immunizations and proper hygiene, and he argued that the US continues to lack the social welfare system required to protect children from such diseases. After the Mother and Baby Home closed in 1961, Ireland continued to pass legislation that affected pregnant women. In 1983, the Eighth Amendment of Ireland was passed, restricting abortion under all circumstances unless the pregnant woman's life is in imminent danger. The Catholic Church endorsed the Amendment as a way to reduce abortions. As of 2018, the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home still makes international headlines in The New York Times, as researcher Barry continues to publish interviews with survivors and collaborations with Corless.

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