

# THE TRUTH BEHIND TUAM

22, 30 June 2014

It was the tale that shocked the world: the bodies of 800 babies found in a septic tank in Tuam. But what is the real story? And now to another overseas shocker and one of the most awful stories of 2014. At the beginning of June you may have seen revelations about a mass grave being discovered in County Galway, on the West of Ireland: Bodies of 800 children, long-dead, found in septic tank at former Irish home for unwed mothers Sydney Morning Herald, 4th June, 2014.

Yes, a mass grave, containing 800 children had been found on the site of an old mother and baby home run by nuns in the historic town of Tuam. And if you thought it was all too bad to be true, scores of other media around the world, including our ABC, confirmed the terrible tale.

MARK COLVIN: In County Galway, the remains of 800 babies and young children have been discovered dumped inside a disused septic tank. ABC News Online, 5th June, 2014. The journalist who wrote Philomena—about a woman's search for her son taken by Irish nuns could hardly contain his horror: In nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent, I covered stories of mass graves in far-flung locations in Eastern Europe and Russia.

But never did I expect to be covering a mass grave from modern times on my own doorstep. Mail Online, 8th June, 2014. In Ireland the impact was even greater, with several papers likening it to the Holocaust. And the Irish Independent comparing those nuns in Tuam to the butchers of Belsen Rwanda and Srebrenica.

But ... how reliable was this story? And why were there no pictures of the bodies? Had good taste for once prevailed? Well no. You see no babies had been found. Nor indeed had the septic tank. Oh yes, and did we forget to tell you that those 796 children died of natural causes? With Measles, Influenza, pneumonia, TB and whooping cough topping the list. So how did this story get so out of hand? Well, if you're looking for a culprit, the Daily Mail group's your man. Starting with the Irish Mail on Sunday which began the hue and cry: A MASS GRAVE OF 800 BABIES Irish Mail on Sunday, 25th May, 2014. The Mail's article on 25 May said the remains of these 800 children were most likely:

"Interred in a concrete tank beside the home" So what was their evidence? A local historian Catherine Corless had collected death certificates for all who died at the mother and baby home between 1925 and 1961, when it closed. And after finding almost none of the children in cemetery records she'd concluded the nuns must have disposed of them. 'There was just one child who was buried in a family plot in the graveyard in Tuam. That's how I am certain there are 796 children in the mass grave.' Irish Mail on Sunday, 25th May, 2014.

This mass grave—Corless believed—was in a walled garden. And somewhere beneath the grass, she suspected, lay what the Mail first described as a water tank, which had been: stumbled upon in the 1970s by Barry Sweeney and Francis Hopkins, then aged 12. Mr Sweeney recalled: 'It was a concrete slab. We used to be in there playing but there was always something hollow underneath it so we decided to bust it open and it was full to the brim of skeletons.' Irish Mail on Sunday, 25th May, 2014.

Now that would surely have been a shocking discovery. But the two boys had seen perhaps 20 skeletons ... nearly 40 years ago. And the water tank—if that's what it was had not been sighted since. What's more, Catherine Corless had been calling it a crypt. Yet none of this stopped the Mail's British cousins at the UK Mail Online from beating it up into an international sensation: Mass septic tank grave 'containing the skeletons of 800 babies' at site of Irish home for unmarried others. Mail Online, 2nd June, 2014.

Note that in this story—published in Australia—it was now a septic tank, full to the brim with 800 baby skeletons. And after this was picked up by news agencies, AP and AFP, it was just a small step for US websites like BuzzFeed, the Boston Globe and New York Daily News, to report that 800 bodies had actually been found. 800 skeletons of babies found inside septic tank at former Irish home for unwed mothers: report. Daily News, 3rd June, 2014. That of course was bullshit.

As were claims in the Irish press that the dead babies had not been given Christian burials ... by order of the Catholic Church. And this soon became clear, as Spiked's Brendan O'Neill examined the evidence—or lack of it—and revealed what a beat up it was. Enquiring as he did so: How did speculation that some children out of 796 might have been buried in a former septic tank become news headlines about 800 dead children having been found in a septic tank, leading to comparisons being made between Ireland's old nuns and the architects of the Nazi Holocaust?

Spiked, 9th June, 2014. How indeed? But as Spiked so eloquently observed, it was proof of the maxim that a lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on. So what IS the truth? Well the head of investigations at Ireland's public broadcaster RTE, Philip Boucher-Hayes, may have got close to it. He found a witness in Tuam who told him of falling into a burial plot in the grounds of the home in the mid-1970s and seeing around 100 dead babies, neatly stacked on what looked like shelves.

MARY MORIARTY: You could see they were swaddled up, rolled up in cloth and placed one after another on each raise, and there was quite a lot of them there. RTE, Radio 1, Drivetime, 13th June, 2014. Mary Moriarty described that chamber as a crypt. There was no raw sewage and the babies had not been dumped. Nor was Boucher-Hayes surprised.

Philip Boucher-Hayes: Whatever cruelties you could lay at the nuns' feet, however harsh or however medically incompetent the regimes that they ran in the mother and babies homes might have been, particularly in Tuam, it was always hard to believe that they would have knowingly put babies into a septic tank . RTE, Radio 1, Drivetime, 13th June, 2014. So why did the media fall for it?

As Dublin City University's professor of journalism Steven Knowlton put it in Crikey : For several years now, Ireland has been rocked by scandal after scandal involving the abuse of children — the mass grave-in-a-septic-tank fits the narrative. Crikey, 13th June, 2014. In other words it matched our prejudices. And it made such great headlines, it was really too good to check. And who cared if it suggested those nuns were mass murderers?

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s4036355.htm>

## COMMENTS

**01 Jul 2014 Fred Deeks.** If something is 3 and it is increased to 9 it is a three-fold increase or a 300% increase. While 100% is the most effort you can put into anything ("the coach said the team put in 110%" is an impossibility) You are correct that you cannot HAVE 300% of "a thing" you can still have something that is 300% higher than another. Other than that, most of what Peter Lockhart wrote appears to be about as believable, with as many facts, as the original story about the mass grave.

**Fred Deeks : 01 Jul 2014.** How can you have 500% or 300% of anything? 100% is the complete total of all things, you cannot have more than 100% of anything, you already have all there is.

**Trisk : 01 Jul 2014.** It is both grammatically and mathematically correct to say that a larger number is 500% of the original figure. Besides, it kinda misses the point, this type of comment, doesn't it?

**Peter Lockhart : 01 Jul 2014.** The normal infant mortality rate is "X" the infant mortality rate in those homes was "5X" and "3X" or in other words 500% and 300% more than the normal infant mortality rate.

**Lawrie Ayres : 01 Jul 2014.** And what documented evidence does Peter Lockhart have to back his claim? I suspect that Peter is just like the lazy reporters in this story. Why have the police not been called to investigate such well known "facts" as Peter alleges? Surely a Royal Commission or the like would have been established by a concerned government. Or does Peter know of a national conspiracy?

**Peter Lockhart : 01 Jul 2014.** I was there.

**Patrick : 01 Jul 2014.** Once again a mythical, made up horror story , to embarrass the catholic church. What we are seeing is a new form of Salem trials, meant to destroy the church once and for all. What a shame the press dont go after Islam with the same rabid zeal , like they are with the catholic church. Then again maybe they dont want a fatwa put on their heads.

**Peter Lockhart : 01 Jul 2014.** Made up? Then where are the bodies? The Nuns sold babies to American and worked the mothers like slaves and never gave them any medical help. That is fact not myth.

**TerryT : 01 Jul 2014.** "In other words it matched our prejudices" Which is why the ABC reported it without any fact checking ?

**Peter Lockhart : 01 Jul 2014.** The Catholic Church allowed and cover up the rape of children in their care, and also the murder by gross neglect of children. To deny the atrocity is self delusion.

**Toby Tortoise : 01 Jul 2014.** I think it weakens Mediawatch's professional image to swear in an item like this. The use of the word bullshit is more appropriate to a lighter tone of item - perhaps about one of the more ludicrous radio personalities - or a comedy news program. Perhaps it was intended to convey incredulity and anger. I think it is lazy language and a better word should have been chosen to show outrage.

**Kyle : 01 Jul 2014.** What is not disputed by anyone is that while written, tangible death records were kept by the Bon Secours sisters (the nuns who ran St. Mary's Home), and that they were procured by Corless from the Tuam registry office, no one - neither the sisters nor anyone within the Roman Catholic Church - has provided written, tangible proof concerning burial records - as in burial location(s) for the 796 dead children. Indeed, where are they?

If a detective was tasked by his department to look for even 10 dead children and obtained the death records, but no burial records were handed over to him, but yet he was told that a site containing the 10 dead children was found - complete with a lovely memorial marker - you can bet that heads would roll. And either he, a prosecutor or a government entity would have that place exhumed to see if some or all of the 10 were indeed buried there.

The argument that the conditions at St. Mary's Home was common then and/or stacking kids for burial was common then, too, instead of having individual headstones does not fit in well with a narrative proffered by some that then (and now) the RCC takes a higher road and standard for itself and others within its' care. Many cemeteries were nearby and the RCC had the \$\$\$ to erect churches, beautify them and so forth, but did not have the \$\$\$ to help the sisters give individual burials for each of the 796 children? Riiiiight. Why didn't the RCC help the sisters to do this?

**Peter Lockhart : 30 Jun 2014.** The babies were sold for high prices to Americans like prize puppies, the mothers were worked like slaves for years, they received no proper medical care and many died in childbirth, they were not given pain killers, the death rate of the children was 500% or 300% the norm and there are no official records of the burial places and eyewitness accounts of an old septic tank filled with skulls and bones.

That in to is an atrocity. Its not unique to that "Home" but to all Religious homes of such a nature in Ireland and elsewhere. This is a crime against humanity. I know because I was in one such a home in Cornwall when aged 4 years. It was a living hell. Now the truth will come out once and for all.

**crank : 01 Jul 2014.** I agree Peter. A brief perusal of the causes of death entered eg marasmus, debility etc, indicate grotesque neglect. It is pretty typical of the hard Right 'Spiked' and Amanda Vanstone's play-mate Brendan O'Neill, to find any exculpation for the crimes of reliably Rightwing organisations like the Holy Roman Catholic Church. I rather doubt that O'Neill, who is as much a 'journalist' as I am an astronaut, would take the same position if this horror of child neglect had occurred in China or Russia.

**Colette : 01 Jul 2014.** But Peter, the problem is that none of what you say is true.

**Ed : 01 Jul 2014.** Did you actually read the above Media Watch piece? Got proof of the babies being sold to Americans?

**Martin X : 01 Jul 2014.** Thank you for sharing that Peter. From what I have read - here and elsewhere - conditions were indeed horrific. It was clear from reading the story overseas that the headlines grossly misstated what was discovered, and that has only helped people dismiss the horror of what actually went on. Why anyone thought that nuns would be good at looking after children is beyond me.

**JP : 01 Jul 2014.** Like the original story, Peter Lockhardt you are spewing crap with no evidence and no proper sources to back your story.

**Peter Lockhart : 01 Jul 2014.** It's Lockhart and its not crap. The atrocities - rape and treatment of women by Catholic Clergy is well known. I was in such a "Home". Call me a liar to my face.

**John: 01 Jul 2014.** Your statement simply repeats the prejudices that lead to the original articles - unsubstantiated nonsense. Single mothers in western societies were once forced to give up their children for adoption - this was undertaken by many state run institutions as well as those run by religions. State orphanages and adoption agencies did exactly the same.

This was well known to the community and had widespread support at the time. Of course, these days we leave children with dysfunctional families where they are maltreated and killed by their own parents!