

# Confronting compartmentalization: Bessboro Mother & Baby Home

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## Overview

### Critical Question:

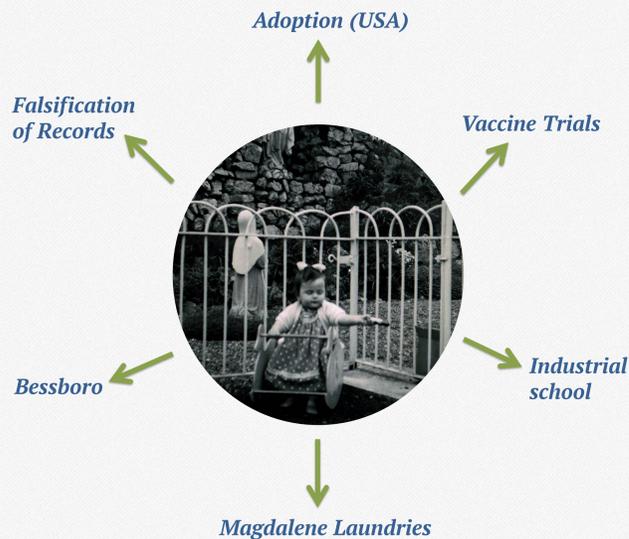
To what extent does the Bessboro Mother & Baby Home in Cork (hereafter Bessboro) reflect the inevitable interconnectedness between Irish institutions?

### Thesis:

Bessboro indicates a failure or refusal on the part of the State to recognize the traffic between Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries, and child residential institutions, and the connections in terms of class and gender between populations across these institutions.

### Methodology:

We studied multiple aspects of Bessboro in relation to other Irish institutions based on traffic into and out of the home, survivor testimony, and documentation.



## Maternity Home Act of 1934

The *Maternity Home Act of 1934* attempted to **document and regulate Maternity homes** across Ireland in response to an increase in infant mortality. Maternity homes “were defined as premises which are... used for the reception of pregnant women or of women immediately after child-birth” (Interdepartmental Report 24). This legislation required that “homes registered under the Act shall keep records of: (a) every reception into such home; (b) every discharge from such home; (c) every confinement therein; (d) every miscarriage therein; (e) every birth therein; (f) every death therein; (g) every removal of a child therefrom” (24). The Act made an effort to more firmly regulate the Church-owned Mother and Baby Homes and increase communication between them and the State.

An excerpt from *The Irish Times* on Thursday, February 8th, 1934 records discussions about how the Maternity Home Act was received. Mr. S. B. Minch (U.L.P Kildare) believed the bill had more to do with increased rates of illegitimate births than increased rates of infant mortality, saying “that illegitimacy was becoming a tremendous social problem, and [inquiring] if its grave increase was the reason for the introduction of the bill” (*The Irish Times* 1). Minch’s remarks reflect a **common belief that the real social problem was women’s sexuality**, not abuse within an institution. Dr. Ward, the Parliamentary Secretary at the Time, quickly refutes Minch’s assertions, stating “the necessity of the bill was not because of any known increase in illegitimacy but because of the **high death rate among illegitimate children**” (*The Irish Times* 2).

## Birth at Bessboro

In 1998, June Goulding published *The Light in the Window*, a memoir about her experience as a midwife in Bessboro in 1951. She recounts being instructed not to give women the available epidurals and that women were expected to be silent during birth. If a woman suffered a perineal tear laceration, Goulding was forbidden to repair it with the surgical material in the cabinets. The religious sisters contended that pain in childbirth was atonement for the women’s sins, while women explained: “**Nobody gets anything here, nurse. They just have to suffer**” (Goulding 28).

Complications in labor and untreated surgeries likely caused the women life long injuries, all due to the unethical treatment. Unfortunately, Goulding’s account is one of the only forms of documentation about the labor and birthing treatment in the home.

## Adoption

*The Clann Project’s Ireland’s Unmarried Mothers and Their Children: Gathering Data* includes survivor testimony documenting mistreatment at Bessboro (Para 1.291).

On **forced adoption**, the first statement in “Survivors Speak” contradicts the characterization of the Sacred Heart Home and Adoption Society in Leo McMahon’s “Adoption Society provides full and free service” published in *The Southern Star* in August 1980. His description of “the beautiful center at Blackrock” and the positive image of three smiling nuns (McMahon 10) conflicts with both June Goulding’s account of abuse at Bessboro and the survivor’s description of what occurred there.

Comparing testimony from *Clann* with McMahon’s article, it is difficult to conclude which is more accurate. Though from a different decade, the article fails to mention the home’s past and compartmentalizes the darker history of this institution. Failure to understand Bessboro’s happenings over time **threatens to undermine the experiences of those women and children impacted by this larger system.**

## Sacred Heart nuns deny they ran ‘orphans for sale’ adoption racket

by Eamon Timmins

IRISH nuns alleged to have been involved in an “orphans for sale” operation insisted last night they never sought donations in return for placing children with American or British couples.

An estimated 650 Irish children left the Sacred Heart adoption agency in Cork city between 1944 and 1965 to be adopted by American and British families, but the agency’s senior social worker, Sister Sarto Harney, said no money changed hands.

The Sacred Heart sisters were among agencies accused of trying to solicit donations for adoptions in an investigation by the Sunday Times.

Lawyer Franklin Rubin said he remembered money being paid to the Cork adoption agency during the 1960s as part of the adoption of Mari



Sister Sarto, at Sacred Heart Convent last night, with adoption papers that make ‘no mention of money’.

Steed by a Florida couple. But Sister Sarto said Sacred Heart files — containing all documentation for each adoption — went back to 1944, when the first American couple adopted a child from the order’s home for mothers

had no previous financial link with the child.

Sister Sarto said the order contacted Sister Kieran Marie, now with its mission in Zambia, who was in charge of maternity at the home from 1944 to 1955. And it contacted Sister Cyril, also in Zambia, who had been involved with American adoptions. Both nuns insisted money was never paid for adoptions.

Sister Sarto believed some grateful adoptive parents later may have sent small donations to the home, but these were never sought and there was no record of them.

Sister Mary McManus, who joined the home in 1949 and still works there as a social worker, said she never saw money being exchanged. Sister Sarto said staff and their fund-raising committee were very hurt by the allegations.

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## Discrepancies in Infantile Mortality

According to the Inter-Departmental Committee, in 1939 Bessboro had “**an infantile death rate of 47%**” (Inter-Departmental Report). A special investigation by Conall Ó Fátharta in *The Irish Examiner* reports that “478 children died” between 1934 and 1953 and that these were “**the only years for which deaths were recorded**” by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart at Bessboro (Ó Fátharta).

However, Ó Fátharta complicates the picture of infantile mortality at Bessboro further by revealing that between 1938 and 1944 the “**Religious order reported to the State that 353 babies died** in Bessborough, but its **own register showed 80 fewer deaths**” (Ó Fátharta). What are the implications of this discrepancy?

Why were more deaths reported to the State than the number observed in the Order’s own records? Did the State investigate the discrepancy or were the Department of Health officials’ content with the partially completed Statistical form?

The *Clann Project* (2018) reports that witness testimony “outlines many instances where documents were forged or contained knowingly false information to facilitate illegal adoptions” (Para 1.113). Do these discrepancies provide a possible explanation for the high rates of infantile mortality in the earlier period? Did death records contain falsified information in order to **facilitate illegal adoptions**?

## Survivors Speak

### From *Clann*:

- “The nuns at Bessborough **made my life hell and changed my life forever**...I think I am still in shock, still traumatised...I think I will die with the pain and trauma that was caused during this time” (Para 1.291).
- “Witness 10, who was born in Bessborough, has also spoken about feeling deliberately discouraged from continuing her searches for information...She was told by the nuns at Bessborough that her natural mother couldn’t read or write, which she later found out was false. She thinks that this was: ‘**another tactical attempt at discouraging [her] from searching for information**’” (Para 3.65).
- “...Witness 12 says that the **pregnant women were required to work** at Bessborough. She says she was required to cut the lawn with scissors with a group of other women: ‘we were not allowed to stop when we felt tired. In the winter months I had to polish and scrub the corridors. Other women were sent to work in the laundries. The work was especially difficult given that I and the other women were pregnant. **I worked seven days a week every week until I went into labour**’” (Para 1.226).

“And then I worked in the laundry. That was **just filthy, bloody sheets and everything else, I had to wash them by hand** before they went into the big washing machine and that was a bit messy altogether, but you got on with it you had to do it...After that I’d look forward to going back to ‘Robert’ to look after him in the afternoon.”

—Terry Healy (*Idependent.ie*)

“As soon as I could think, my American parents told me I was from Ireland, from a work home...They explained to me that **babies were sold to American parents** and that I was lucky enough to be sold to them as many of the children in these homes never got out...” —Sr Brigid O’ Mahony (*The Irish Examiner*)



## Vaccine Trials

In the 1960’s, Wellcome Laboratories gave Professor Patrick Meenan and Dr. Irene Hillary of University College Dublin a research grant to investigate the effects of experimental vaccine practices, specifically testing the efficacy of mixed quadrivalent vaccines to attempt to reduce the number of injections for infants. In 1961, Dr. Irene Hillary tested how infant’s immunity to polio would be affected if instead of being given an individual polio vaccine, they were given a quadrivalent vaccine with polio and DTP. The infants were from five different Mother and Baby Homes across Ireland ranging from **ages 5 months to 48 months** (Hillary 1962). Following the 1961 trial there were two other clinical vaccine trials, and by the end of the 1960’s at least **211 infants** from the homes had been subject to the experiments.

In May 1991, the trials were brought to the attention of the Minister for Health. When investigation into these unethical trials began in the early 2000’s, both Meenan and Hillary sued the State to have the investigation suspended due to health reasons and reputation respectively (Carolan 2005).

## Mothers after Bessboro

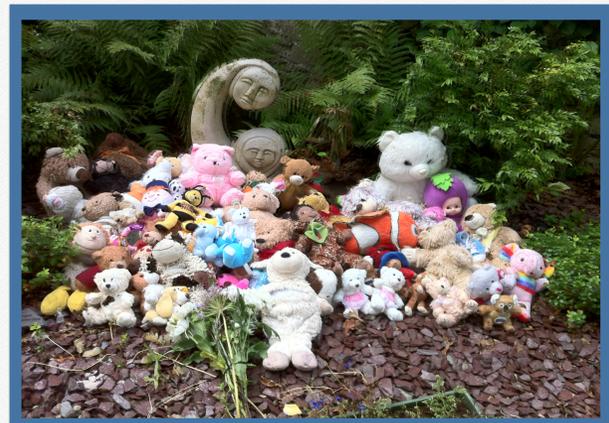
### Total Annual Returns for Mothers at Bessboro 1951-1973

Situations	663
Other Homes	45
Other Discharges	45

A narrative of “moral rescue” (Luddy 797) for unmarried mothers is evident in the language of the State’s **Annual Statistical Returns**,

completed by the Matron at Bessboro and submitted to the Department of Health every year. These statistics reveal that many women “absconded each year,” were “awaiting confinement,” were “sent to situations” or “sent to other homes.” The use of “absconded” is particularly telling, as it suggests criminality in the actions of unmarried mothers who in reality were in the home on a voluntary basis. Simultaneously, it reveals that women tried to escape these institutions, indicating harsh conditions. What were these “situations” that women filled once they left Bessboro, and where were they? How many left Ireland? How many searched in vain for their children? The Statistical Returns, **oftentimes only partially completed**, lack the level of detail necessary to answer such questions.

The State did not challenge the nuns for their failure to complete the Annual Statistical Returns. We are unable to know what became of these women, despite the fact they were part of the State’s **institutional complex**.



## Continuing Questions

1. Is the lack of access to records continuing to enable this compartmentalization?
2. Is academia part of the problem in portraying history through official archives at the expense of survivor testimony? Does this top-down process support a narrative of compartmentalization?
3. In light of the news about Tuam, will there be exhumations at Bessboro, Castle Pollard, and other maternity homes and mother and baby homes?
4. Why is the birthing process at Bessboro not documented more clearly? What might this indicate about the broader ideology and stigma surrounding unmarried mothers?

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