

Books



The Irish Gulag

How the state betrayed its innocent children

Bruce Arnold • Gill and Macmillan

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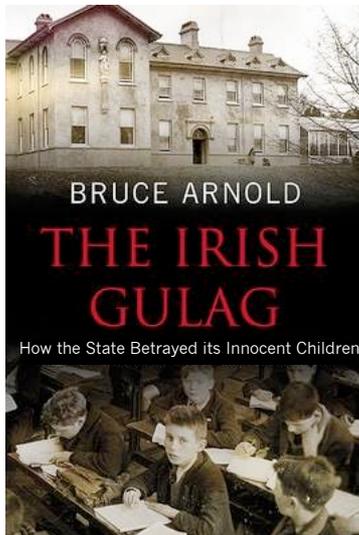
THE GULAG was the government agency that administered the penal labour camps of the Soviet Union. The term was also used to refer to the camps themselves, especially those that held political prisoners. The word became familiar in the west through the publication in 1973 of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *The Gulag Archipelago*, which likened the scattered camps to a 'chain of islands'. More than 14 million (some say as many as 80 million) people passed through the *Gulag* from 1928 to 1953, and at least a million died in them.

Bruce Arnold uses the term to refer to the system of reformatories and industrial schools, originally set up in Ireland in 1868 to care for 'neglected, orphaned and abandoned children' and continued after independence. Over the period from 1936 to 1970, about 150,000 children were detained in these residential schools, financed by the Department of Education and operated by various religious orders of the Catholic Church. Contrary to popular belief, the industrial schools were not orphanages or detention centres but simply places where children were sent if they had unmarried mothers, were from broken homes or if their parents were too poor and couldn't care for them.

Arnold justifies the appellation 'gulag' by demonstrating that the regimes were universally harsh, punishment was cruel and excessive, and the children were deprived of proper food, medical, and psychological care. They 'lost' their education, instead working much of their time as slave labour. And they were subjected to systematic and sustained physical, sexual and emotional abuse by many of the priests and nuns who ran the institutions.

An obvious difference between the Russian Gulag and this Irish variant is that in the latter only a few actually died, but, as Arnold suggests, one reason was that in Ireland the children were worth money so long as they were kept alive. The 18 religious orders received a capitation payment for each child, which was enough to feed and clothe them and to pay for lay teachers and recreational facilities. But the children were given very little of these things and instead the religious orders siphoned off most of the money for their own unknown purposes.

Children were routinely punched, kicked, leathered, raped and bugged, forced to eat their own excrement and thrown out in the freezing cold all night. At Letterfrack the boys knelt and used their spread-out fingers as hoes on the farm. Artane had its own cemetery and no one knows how many abused children who subsequently died were buried there.



Although *The Irish Gulag* is a comprehensive account of the origins and running of these institutions, it doesn't stop there. Arnold is just as, if not more, concerned about the culpability of the state in allowing it all to happen over many decades. The state essentially betrayed these children, and in the last 10 years it has been involved in a conspiracy with the Catholic Church to lessen the impact of public outrage.

Arnold shows that the state's behaviour since 1999 when Bertie Ahern made his 'public apology' has been designed to protect itself and the orders rather than seek justice and recompense for the victims. Arnold recounts how in newspaper articles he exposed the 2002 secret indemnity deal negotiated by the Minister for Education, Michael Woods, with the Catholic Church by which the state would only take a meagre €128m from the orders, even though the taxpayers' bill for compensation would be in excess of €1bn.

The state also endeavoured to protect itself in terms of the remit of the Ryan Commission, because the issue of its responsibility for allowing the system to run was not to be investigated and nor was it. Moreover, none of the evidence gathered by the state in the Ryan Report can be used as evidence in a court of law.

As the book went to press just before the Ryan Report was published, it includes an addendum asking readers to visit irishgulag.ie to see Arnold's response to it. Essentially, he regards it as a whitewash in which the state has sought to pervert the course of justice. More money is now being offered but, if it is accepted, it will be a bribe to deny the victims their lawful justice. He accuses the report of (1) failing to confront the state on its most blatant lack of transparency and where it has been most vulnerable because of misleading and dishonest presentation of its purposes and intents, and (2) failing to confront the Roman Catholic Church at the highest level, where it not only allowed this truly inhuman situation to exist in the industrial schools, but actively protected the abusers through a papal policy of secrecy, whose very existence was a secret.

Has Ireland really transformed itself, or is it only playing with the appearance of change?

Non-Catholics in Ireland who have been critical of the Catholic Church and the state's collusion with it since independence has often been accused of bigotry. But *The Irish Gulag* provides us with damning evidence of the rectitude of our judgement, at least until the last couple of decades. The Irish people threw off the yoke of Britain but replaced it with the bondage of Roman Catholicism. They shed the oppressive rule of British imperial power, only to slide into the antidemocratic, totalitarian cocoon of Roman religious imperialism. In spite of its apparent democratic institutions, the Irish Republic was a conservative one-party Catholic state.

In some respects, the reality has changed considerably in recent years. The society has become more cosmopolitan, liberal and pluralist. But the Catholic Church sustains its hold on education and health, and the state's behaviour in protecting itself and the Church over this systematic institutional child abuse is a scandalous reversion to type. Has Ireland really transformed itself, or is it only playing with the appearance of change? Is it trying to have its cake and eat it? Until it truly ends its suffocating dependence on Catholic power, it cannot claim to have fully joined the modern world, and it cannot hope for a real unity on the island. □