

## Irish religious to fore in Australian abuse scandal

---

**Mary Raftery**  
**Irish Times**

THERE IS always one story that haunts you, so graphic and disturbing it is almost too terrible to contemplate.

In over a decade of researching the experiences of people all over the world whose childhoods were destroyed by state-sponsored abuse, **one of the worst I came across was that of a small, blue-eyed boy at Tardun**, an orphanage in western Australia. He was one of the tens of thousands apologised to on Monday by Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, as that country at last faces up to the savage abuses suffered by so many taken as children into state-funded care.

This boy had been sent to Australia from the UK. He told his story to a British House of Commons select committee established in the late 1990s to investigate the child migrant schemes.

Tardun was one of the more notorious of Australia's 500 or so children's institutions. It had all sorts of Irish connections. It was one of four such institutions run by the Christian Brothers, who were tightly controlled by their Irish leadership, based at the Dublin headquarters in Marino. They even named another of their western Australian institutions Clontarf – it is to be found in Waterford, a suburb of Perth.

Many of the brothers working in the Australian institutions were first generation Irish. These included Br Paul Keaney, the infamous resident manager of Bindoon (another Christian Brothers-run boys' orphanage) up to the 1950s, who was born in Rossinver, Co Leitrim.

Thousands of boys passed through these institutions. Most were Australian, who, like so many Irish children, ended up in care during the middle decades of the 20th century for reasons of poverty and disadvantage.

Thousands of others, however, had been sent from institutions throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with the promise of a new life of sunshine and hope. And among these were to be found a surprising number of Irish children, born to Irish mothers fleeing the censorious atmosphere in this country and hoping to keep their pregnancies secret by going to England.

There are no precise figures so far, but it has been estimated that up to a quarter of those sent might have Irish parents.

In 1998, in what remains the most damning picture of Australia's children's institutions, the House of Commons select committee reported that "the worst cases of criminal abuse in Australia appear to have occurred in institutions run by the agencies of the Catholic Church, in particular the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy".

The report went on to say that some of the abuse investigated "was of a quite exceptional depravity, so that terms like 'sexual abuse' are too weak to convey it".

Then comes the indelible account of the blue-eyed boy: "*Those of us who heard the account of a man who as a boy was a particular favourite of some Christian Brothers at Tardun who competed as to who could rape him 100 times first, his account of being in terrible pain, bleeding and bewildered, trying to beat his own eyes so they would cease to be blue as the Brothers like his blue eyes, or being forced to masturbate animals, or being held upside down over a well and threatened in case he ever told, will never forget it*".

With evidence of this kind coming from a British parliamentary committee, and substantiated over and over again by various Australian senate committee reports, the wonder is that it has taken the Australian government so long to apologise.

The pressure for such an apology has been building for a quarter of a century as thousands of former children in care began to trace their origins and uncover the sordid saga of their forced migration. Many had great difficulty tracking their families throughout Britain, but none more so than those whose mothers turned out to be Irish.

Giving birth in the relative anonymity of a British hospital was regarded by thousand of Irish women as preferable to facing the stigma of an unmarried pregnancy going full term in Ireland and resulting in a birth. Many of these mothers gave up their children to various British-based agencies. In some cases, the babies ended up in state-run children's homes, in others they were given into the care of religious orders. A number were also adopted and fostered.

Their fate was much fought over by self-styled Irish protection and rescue organisations, who patrolled the wards of Liverpool and London maternity hospitals, pleading with Irish mothers to bring their babies home and give them up to religious orders. The idea was to ensure the children would be raised as Catholics. The fact that many of them would end up in Irish industrial schools was of little concern.

Those Irish babies who remained in Britain were usually placed in institutions run by Catholic nuns, principally the Nazareth Sisters. And these institutions in turn provided the bulk of the thousands of Catholic children sent to Australia under a scheme jointly run by the Australian and British governments, which lasted until the late 1960s.

There was a promise that these children, many as young as three years old, would be placed with Australian families who would treat them as their own. This, however, became a reality for very few.

Almost all of the Catholic children were sent immediately to institutions run principally by the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy – the two congregations also most prominent in the management of the Irish industrial schools. Given the scale of migration from the UK, it is at first glance peculiar that there was no similar scheme for children to be shipped out directly from Irish institutions to Australia. That this one misery at least was not visited on the multitude of children in Ireland's industrial schools is thanks largely to Eamon de Valera, according to Alan Gill in his seminal history of child migration, *Orphans of the Empire*.

In 1938, the head of the Christian Brothers in Australia, Br Louis Conlon, was in the midst of a major and highly successful campaign to increase the number of children (and consequently income by way of grants) being sent from the UK to Australian Catholic institutions. He approached the Irish government, seeking to extend the scheme to Ireland. The response from the cabinet secretary was a terse note to inform him that his suggestion for a child migrant scheme was "not approved".

According to Alan Gill, this was "almost certainly based on the personal views of de Valera, who opposed child migration, and indeed migration in general, as a solution to the new State's problems. His supposed "prejudice" in this matter was aired in a gossip column in the Irish Independent, which criticised his stance".

For those Irish children who did end up in Australia, it would seem that the least we as a nation could do for them now would be to provide every assistance, including financial, to allow them to trace their roots and their families. It was we as a society who hounded their unhappy mothers from our shores. We should now open our arms to their children.