

Transcript of interview with Michael Byrne.

Interviewer: John Cunningham

Date: 20 April 2021

Location: Zoom call between Galway and Massachusetts

Length of Interview: Recording of 33 minutes 27 seconds

The following items were copied and submitted by Mr. Byrne for the archive:

1. Photo of birth mother, Annie Owens
2. Irish passport issued for Michael Byrne in 1961
3. Birth certificate of Michael Byrne (James Patrick Owens)
4. Michael Byrne pictured on the outskirts of Tuam, mid-1980s

John Cunningham: My name is John Cunningham. I'm interviewing Michael Byrne on Zoom for the Tuam Oral History Project. Michael is in the United States. So good afternoon, Michael. I suppose we might start with your early recollections if that's appropriate.

Michael Byrne: Yes, okay. Thank you. Michael James Byrne is my adopted name. I was born James Patrick Owens, in Tuam, on 22nd July 1957. I obviously don't remember my time in Tuam itself. I'm told I lived there for approximately three weeks, and was removed by my birth mother. And there's a gap in my knowledge of what transpired at that point. But I was transferred over to St. Patrick's, Temple Hill in Dublin, where I remained up to August of

1961. Just over four years of a stay there. I was probably in that home for so long because I was born with a handicapped right leg and foot. So I probably wasn't the first choice of a lot of people. For obvious reasons. I'd probably do the same myself if I was an adoptive parent, But those are my first memories of St. Pat's. In being there up the age of four, I do remember glimpses, if you will, of the rooms I stayed in, of the outer structure of St. Patrick's, Temple Hill, and I have nothing but positive experiences there. There has never been any abuse or anything along those lines.

Documentation shows that I was actually the oldest child in Temple Hill at the time of my adoption. Documentation says I was probably quite special to the nuns, because of that – long term – and I assume that with the turnover, most of these adoptees spent six months to maybe a year there at that point. But August of '61, I was adopted, picked up by my adoptive mother and my godmother in Dublin. We flew back on Aer Lingus, the old route of Gander, Newfoundland, and on to Boston, Massachusetts, where I've grown up as a Bostonian, just outside of Boston.

My parents at that point – two years later – started putting me in a children's hospital in Boston for corrective surgeries on that leg. So I spent a total of six years every summer doing corrective surgeries. And painful rehabs – that's the part I remember more. They call it physical training now, but I called it torture when I was six. But at that point, it straightened me out a lot. But also, when I reflect back on it, the adoption process, and the circumstances of my birth, have formed me and affected my life. For the most part, I had a good home. I have an adopted brother Patrick. He was from Meath – Coombe Hospital in Dublin, I believe, was his place of birth. But he was adopted, prior to me, by my adoptive parents, and brought over at the age of six months in 1960. And they took that gap between the two. But I'd like to mention, that's where my parents saw me. And I refer to my parents as my adoptive parents, because that's how I grew up. My mother fell for me as soon as she saw me there, and arranged to adopt me as well. And obviously, there was a process – I think, a year – where my brother had to be settled in the States prior to them being able to adopt the second child.

So again, it took until August of '61. They bring me over and they arrange that as well as all those corrective surgeries, in the leading children's hospital in the world at the time, and I had the leading orthopaedic surgeon, world renowned. So, yeah, he straightened me out quite well. But during that time period, I had braces on my legs, I had a lift on my right

foot, it being a couple inches shorter than my left leg. So I received a lot of teasing my elementary years. It was twofold: number one, being an adoptee; number two, being deformed. And kids will be kids.

JC: So you were aware from a young age that you were adopted? Obviously, you remembered another environment?

MB: Always. My parents always enforced on both of us our Irish nationality. Obviously my adoptive father was Irish with the last name Byrne. My mother was half Irish. Donahue was her maternal side. And Swedish on the other. Her father – last name, Norman. But they always encouraged us in our Irishness, if you will. And to the point of telling me to get up in the living room when guests were there to dance a jig. Knowing that, number one, I never knew what a jig was and, number two, it was quite difficult because they kept on forgetting that I had that little bum right leg. But I soldiered through it. And it's a fond memory, the fact that they always reinforced my Irishness. And they took us back to Ireland. I have a photo of me, 1974, which would have been my second year of high school. And of me returning to the convent, meeting the sister who had corresponded – between my mother and herself – all those years ago.

JC: This was St. Patrick's?

MB: Yes, St. Patrick's in Temple Hill. Yeah, I don't think the photo shows Temple Hill, I think there might have been another location at that point. Temple Hill was a big grey stone structure. And the photo I have is red brick, which obviously you see all over Ireland. But I never remember red brick being in Temple Hill... And she [the sister] was very kind to me. She wrote some lovely letters to my parents: prior to my adoption, through the adoption process, and follow up too, to see how I was doing, mentioning that a couple of the sisters missed me and missed sneaking the sweets to me, and so on. So that's how I know about that one.

But Tuam to me was as far away as Mars. I knew nothing about it. I knew that it was the town I was from, but I knew nothing about Tuam. I have a photo of me returning Ireland in the '80s standing, leaning, on the sign 'Welcome to Tuam', with a big grin on my face,

totally oblivious that I shouldn't be smiling. Not with what I know now. But who knew at the time? I remember being in a pub with the girlfriend I was with at the time. And her teasing me, leaning to the left and the right, pointing out that could be my cousin. It could be a sister. 'Look at her, look at her now'. I shut her up quite quickly.

JC: By the time you went to the United States, Tuam was closed, or closing at any rate?

MB: I believe yes, they closed in '61. So, what went on there and all that, I never knew – not until 2017. When I started my own personal search. I flew over to Dublin, went into the GRO, [General Record Office] found my listing. On that birth cert it showed my mother's name – which I already knew by the way. I had that documentation, but it mentioned St Mary's, Tuam, as my birthplace. My jaw dropped at that point because by then I knew it was in all in the Irish papers, all over the news, with what Catherine Corless had discovered. I got a phone call from the author of the book, *My Name is Bridget* [Alison O'Reilly], Oh, yeah. And she interviewed me that evening, that night, in the Stephen's Green Hotel right there. We had a good chat of about an hour, and I showed her all the paperwork that I had brought with me from all those years ago. And to use the Irish word, she was gobsmacked at the amount of information that I have – a lot of adoptees don't have all of that correspondence.

One thing led to another, she introduced me to Catherine, and a couple of folks from the Tuam home themselves, who are actually in the news nowadays. You see both these gentlemen who were actually fostered out – they were never adopted. And I ... God, the stories ... and I relate to them what they went through versus what I went through. I think I got the lucky straw, as much as not. I don't have that emotional pain that they must have for the dejection that they endured, and the beatings, and everything they went through. I had a wonderful childhood. I've travelled the world, I've followed on my mother's footsteps of being in the travel industry. I've been all over the world and with that, and being born in an orphanage and all that, there's tremendous empathy on my part for others. It's a proud trait I have – to learn what other people go through and to be thankful for what you have.

JC: So, but growing up then, you have to face this period of hospitalisation every summer, which probably isolated you from your friends.

MB: Yes, every summer. What boy doesn't want to play baseball or sports, or just to climb a tree!

JC: And you were teased at school about that, but also about being about being an adoptee which says it was out in the open, essentially?

MB: Beside the fact that, well, I was always bragging that I was from Ireland. But yeah, that was always there. But you know, you live your life. You only got one, so you keep on going through. But it was a tough childhood as far as the ability to do physical things.

JC: So sport was ruled out?

MB: Yeah. Obviously I gave it a go, I tried my best. you know. Playing hockey goalie and trying out in high school and realising that that there was no reason to believe that I belonged in this group. So I probably retired from that sport. You know, some of those people went on to play in the NHL, so they were quite good. Another sad thing – I made many friends in the hospital too. Now I have a letter from 1968 from my roommate, who died of leukaemia that year. And his last summer was spent with his buddy in the hospital – me. I have a photo of the two of us with a kind letter from the parents stating how much our relationship meant to each other. There were little things that, yes, that if I had gone down different paths I'd never have experienced.

JC: But you were strongly conscious of an Irish identity. And you were taken to Ireland by your parents? And you came back by yourself?

MB: Yes, I've been back to Ireland easily 20 times over the years. Through Bord Fáilte invitations as a travel agent, through running tour groups myself. Sitting beside the driver on a coach driving through the back roads of Ireland and pointing things out. A great experience, and staying in the best hotels in Ireland. You name it. I've slept in that bed.

JC: And you had you had this sense of identity, of your of your background growing up your parents. Your adoptive parents were reasonably well-to-do, strongly Catholic? Am I wrong or ...?

MB: Very much Catholic. As a matter of fact, the parish priest, while building the rectory, stayed with my parents. This is the mid '50s. That church was built in '57, same year that we were born. And, whilst the rectory was being built, the parish priest ... the second home, if you will, for the parish was our house. We were maybe three blocks away from the church itself. But I was brought up Catholic – elementary school, high school. And so I had the nuns from the first day of my life until I graduated high school.

JC: That strong Catholic connections was probably helpful in relation to arranging the adoption as well?

MB: I think wasn't a requirement, yes.

JC: They were more than the Catholic...

MB: They were, they were active, active Catholics.

JC: And your mother was a travel agent, you said?

MB: Yes, and my dad was a steam fitter by trade. He learned in World War Two – he was in the Navy, in the Pacific, in World War Two. A strong man. Now emotionally, neither of them ... let us say there was never much hugging. I don't know why, you know, but it never happened all that much. You know? Yeah. He was a strong man, said what he wanted. He wouldn't take shite from anyone, especially his two little boys, you know. But they brought us up well, good discipline, good whatever.

JC: And what age were they roughly when the adoptions took place?

MB: They were mid 30s, I believe. Yes, if I do the math 24 to 64 would be 40. So he'd be 37 actually when that went on. This is another interesting fact. They died early. I lost them 30 years ago this year. Okay, I was 30 years with them.

JC: So they were in their 60s when they died?

MB: Yes, young. My dad at 67; my mom at 63 – within a month of each other. It was a terrible year for me, my 34th year.

JC: So you had that consciousness of your identity, but when did you start to chase up your background ?

MB: Like a lot of adoptees! We never do anything while our adoptive parents are still there. You know, they were my parents, they raised me. So I never did anything, pursued anything, prior to them passing in 1991. Yeah. From there, '91, I made inquiries, but it seemed everywhere I went – remember, I'm in Boston not in Ireland – obtaining information or finding out what paths to go down was pretty hard. I remember going to Catholic charities and them saying they couldn't release any information. And I didn't know who to write to in Ireland. Who do I appeal to, you know, another speck or grain of sand to them? You know? I always wondered, I've been back multiple times, and never knew what path to go down. But that emotional tug has always been there. Always. I mentioned before in other meetings I've had with other folks over in Ireland through the past couple of years, that leaving on that plane every time from a return trip from Ireland, that it easily tears my eyes – you know, there's something's missing.

JC: You were aware of your birth mother's name, is that right?

MB: Yes, it was on documents. I always knew. Yeah, Annie Owens – I always knew that because of the documentation my parents showed us. But my father's name was always a big slash through that. Not even redacted, just an empty box. That was the case generally.

JC: So you felt that pull?

MB: Well, the pull was there. But the answers were never there. Yes. So you couldn't answer that draw, because there was nothing to go to. Even talking to Irish friends through the business, and everyone shaking their heads, not knowing what to do. It was tough not knowing.

JC: So, at a certain point, then you did begin to find some information that was here in Ireland.?

MB: Yeah, back in 2017, when it all started. And finding out on that trip, after Dublin, when I took the train over to Galway, and I was picked up by one of the gentlemen – I don't know if I can say their names or not.

JC: I think it's okay ... if you want to. When you read it back later, we can redact, if we think otherwise.

JC: Yeah. Well, the two gentlemen – one was P.J. – Haverty I believe is his last name. I was staying at Jury's. And because I'm a travel agent, I knew where the best hotel was. Take a left on Quay street already (laughter). But he picked me up at the front of Jury's and took me up to Tuam for the first time. We had a chat along the way. He told me his story.

JC: You had already obviously established contact by that point. So you've got some pointers from people in Ireland. Is that so?

MB: Yeah, yeah, the doors started opening at that point, as far as information was concerned. Facebook.

JC: So you made contact with the survivors groups. Is that right?

MB: Yes, the ARA, Adoption Rights Alliance – very informative. It's a closed group. On in there, there's proper documentation to give you leads, to be able to pursue and open up avenues to information that you never knew you had before. So, them and the support

groups. There's another Tuam group that I was with for a while, run by a couple of the others – survivor's relatives, of people that were in Tuam.

JC: Yeah.

MB: So it really helped me a lot, that conversation with them. And Peter Mulryan was the other gentleman, along with Catherine Corless. We spent the afternoon in a hotel. I was showing them my documentation and telling stories and getting a lot of suggestions from Catherine as to where to go, and so on. And spent another four years since then; here we are now in 2021. It's like night and day what I know now versus when I never knew [before].

JC: So you have established the area where your birth mother came from, and a few other details?

MB: I have. I've discovered second cousins. Yes. The closest to my birth mother's family. My birth mother's family have all passed – sister and two brothers. They're all gone. Yes. And obviously, the grandmother was gone. But I have all their pictures supplied by my second cousin.

MB: They live in Charlestown, as well as another one in Chicago who emigrated over. And they're the ones that gave me what little history I know of my mother.

JC: Do you want to talk about your mother, to tell us a little about her?

MB: I really don't know that much about her. I've tried, you know. She ended up in Philadelphia. When, I don't know, but I tried. I received documents – her death certificate which my second cousins had, probably being the closest living relative. And they sent that along to me, with the only photo I have of her too, which looks like it was in later years. It was taken in Philadelphia.

JC: So you don't know whether she had a family?

MB: No, as far as I know, she never married. I have no siblings, at least not on her side. She worked I think as a nurse because the picture shows her all in white, you know, so a nursing assistant or caregiver in a nursing home? I don't know. But I tried to track where she lived, where she worked, to try just to get some conversation with somebody who might have known her, to no avail. So, to me, unfortunately, my mother is a mystery.

JC: Do you know what age she was when you were born?

MB: Yes. She was 26. My birth father was 28

JC: So you subsequently had your own birth cert, which had your mother's name. And you subsequently established the name of your father?

MB: That happened yesterday. So you can see that even while I give you this testimony, my story is changing all the time. So I might have to knock on your door a few years from now with an update. Hopefully so. I found my father's name – John Harte – and it just listed him as 28 years old, of Irish nationality, and occupation farmer. Which is a good guess for someone in the west of Ireland. But beyond that, obviously, it's all new to me. The documentation I received yesterday I still need to psychologically digest.

JC: Of course. I don't want to press you to talk about it now either

MB: But as I said when we talked prior to the interview that I would send that along to you for your edification as well. At this point, sharing for me is cathartic.

JC: Yes. Okay. That's all very, very interesting. And I suppose it's also striking that it's unfolding still at the moment. And obviously there are other discoveries to be made.

MB: It's like a mini-series, you have to wait the next year for the next segment of my story to come out!

JC: And you have made, and you maintain, contact with the Alliance in Tuam.

MB: Yes, and they're a good group. Is it the Tuam Alliance group you're referencing? Yes, they're the first group that actually I feel something in common with – obviously that we were all born in the same place. But there are so many adoptees in Ireland – everyone falls into their little niche. And I feel that this group is the little niche I belong in. Relative pain, relative stories, and enlightenment too. They tell me things that I never knew of Tuam.

JC: You obviously have limited memory – no memory at all – of Tuam, based on three weeks...

MB: I've always wondered what Tuam – you know, you picture it – what did it look like. What were the buildings like. I've only seen one picture, I think the press uses it all the time as well. But you know, I stood there that day with P.J. wondering what was the layout here. How could they have done this to these children? How big was this building? What room was I born in? Things that I'll never know.

JC: Yes, I suppose we pieced some of that together. Tuam and the other poor law workhouses were all of a uniform plan. So even though the photographs don't show the entire building, we have an idea what they looked like...

MB: Were they barracks or something, prior?

JC: Briefly yes. They were poor law workhouse, built prior to the Famine, and their greatest use was during the Famine, but they remained in use up to when the new state was established. Then, the new state reconfigured the health and welfare system, but they used these buildings ... which most Irish people associated with the Famine. Anyway, I'm talking too much!

MB: I've always appreciated and always learned Irish history. Yes. Everything, you know, like the Rising for instance. Yeah, I can pretty much tell you everything that went on, you know. But the history of the workhouses and all that, you know, it was one shame after another –

for the British, then for the Irish government. But yes, I know, the Irish state probably had no money back in the '20s and '30s. And that's where the Catholic Church jumped in. Yes.

JC: Were quite eager to jump in, arguably

MB: We'll model it after the Vatican!

JC: [Muted sound, unclear] ... Michael, I've covered the ground that I had hoped to cover, but perhaps there's something that I should have asked that I didn't ask.

MB: No, I acknowledge that I know little about Tuam, I'm learning every day. But what's common is the life experience of adoptees. We always have that wonder – of *what ifs*. What if I grew up in Ireland. Where would I be right now? And how would my life be different? There are so many questions that will never be answered. So you just have to soldier on and do your best.

JC: Yes, all of the experiences are different. Some people like yourself spent weeks, and some people spent years in Tuam. So we're interested in all of the diversity of the experience there and your interview, your testimony, will be a valuable part of the archive. And we are putting the material up, you know, it may take some months to go through all of the all of the details, including your approval. So I'll stop the recording now? Or pause?

MB: I'm good with that, so stop.