

In December 1921, a Children's Home for County Galway opened in the what remained of the Glenamaddy Workhouse, which had been burned out by the IRA during the War of Independence. A high mortality rate drew attention to the unsuitability of the building, leading to a visit from a 'Special Correspondent' of the *Connacht Tribune*. The impressions of that correspondent were published in the paper on 21 June 1924.



## Children of Misfortune: how they are dealt with in Co. Galway

### Scandal of Glenamaddy Home

"Tribune" Special Correspondent

[from *Connacht Tribune*, 21 June 1924]

On a green hillside by a sheet of water lies the old and decayed workhouse of Glenamaddy, a portion of which is crumbling to ruins. The casual visitor passing towards the village, along the road that lies between the crumbled buildings and the bogland lake, may hear shouts of merry laughter. Looking over the grey limestone wall, he will see a fairyland of children's faces revelling amongst the meadows, playing with improvised toys, and building castles with old pieces of timber. Entering the grounds, he will divine things that the outside view cannot reveal; for tragedy in its most poignant form lies concealed beneath the childish gurgles of these tiny toddlers. They are the waifs and strays, the orphans and abandoned, the nameless little ones of the county. Yet they have angel faces that a Raphael might revel in; they have clean, well-kept bodies; and they speak with all the innocent charm of unspoilt children. Under the care of the Bon Secours nuns, who have been charged with lifting the blight from their young lives and sending them into the world cleansed and self-respecting members of society, they are to grow up in happiness and peace.

### A Ramshackle Habitat

The Glenamaddy Children's Home is the third institution in the new County Galway scheme of public health. It was opened in December of 1921, and placed under the control of the Bon Secours nuns, four of whom now manage the institution, assisted by a staff of paid helpers. There are 130 in the house. These include 87 children from infants in arms to little boys and girls of nine, and 26 mothers. The nuns have achieved marvels in the old ramshackle home into which they were thrown without preparation. Yet the place remains a blight and a scandal upon county administration, and the sooner this repository of all the orphaned and the helpless in the county is shifted to a more suitable centre, the better for the credit of those who control our public health.

There are six dormitories in the old workhouse buildings, with highly-placed and gloomy windows. The rooms are small and altogether inadequate to accommodate the little occupants who are too helpless to realise their surroundings. It is in the nature of a grimly ironic comment to read upon a "Child Welfare Chart" hung upon the wall that the sisters should "let in all the light and sunshine and fresh air you can". There is little light within the gloomy portals of Glenamaddy workhouse. There are walls which reek with damp in winter, that have not seen the mason's trowel or that painter's brush for years. There are long gloomy and narrow corridors. Water has to be carried for the children's ablutions. There is not a single permanent bath, and the babies have to be bathed in portable fixtures with water carried by the good nurses whose heavy responsibility is increased tenfold by the inadequate accommodation provided.



Some of the 130 residents of the Glenamaddy Children's Home in 1924: *'They were brought out in the sunshine to be photographed, and they gurgled gleefully as they sucked "sugar-barley" and played joyfully with the two young mothers who kept watch over them.'*

### The House Condemned

When the home was first established in Glenamaddy, it was intended that the roofless building across the courtyard should be restored, and that about £10,000 should be expended on repairs and reconstruction. Then the County Board of Health or the Local Government Department or somebody in authority adopted a change of attitude, and the entire question of locale once more came under review. Since then a procession of inspectors, medical and otherwise, have swarmed to the place, wasting as much money in travelling expenses as would have given the children many a happy day. The home has been condemned again and again, but this condemnation goes no further. The scandal persists.

**'... tragedy in its most poignant form lies concealed beneath the childish gurgles of these tiny toddlers. They are the waifs and strays, the orphans and abandoned, the nameless little ones of the county...'**

It is past time the farce of sending inspectors to make endless reports ending in the same way – the pigeon hole of the file – was stopped, and that these Bon Secours

sisters were given the facilities to do their work under decent and civilised conditions

Why Glenamaddy was ever chosen for a children's home passes comprehension. It is a considerable distance for a railway station, and proportionately expensive to run. For instance if £2 2s. per ton is paid for coal in Dublin, it costs 25s 9d. for carriage and cartage before it delivered to the home. Need I add that a considerable amount of fuel is necessary in a gaunt and damp building such as that in which children and nuns are now housed. The nuns are compelled to pay 10s per ton cartage from Glenamaddy to the nearest railway station. Recently they tried to get coal from Galway and found it cost £6 alone for transport of four tons!

### **Portumna or Tuam?**

The proposal is now on foot to move the home either to Portumna, which, like the Central County Home in Loughrea, is in the Diocese of Clonfert, or to Tuam, which, like Glenamaddy, is in the the Archdiocese. Tuam is obviously by far the more suitable place. It is near a railway station, forms a convenient county centre within easy reach of the main administrative headquarters at Galway, and it has convent and Christian Brothers Schools. Moreover it contains a building of adequate size of from 200 to 300 inmates, and suitable for the segregation of the various classes of cases

There are features about the children's home in Glenamaddy that need not be touched upon. Sufficient has been said to show that it vital for the interests of child welfare in the county that certain classes of entrants be kept apart, and be afforded the opportunity of separate treatment.

There is probably no phase of work in which more delicate consideration, more thorough understanding, or more complete and adequate accommodation and facilities are essential. Countless tragedies and dangerous contamination may be avoided by careful and adequate measures. It is the duty of all who understand as citizens of a Christian country to insure that those whom Fate has dealt hardly are provided with the means of uplift.

**'Why Glenamaddy  
was ever chosen  
for a children's  
home passes  
comprehension...'**

### **Boarding Out at Nine**

I learn that the Local Government Department is anxious to extend the boarding out system to little girls and boys from these homes of nine years. Better a thousand time that these children should remain in some sort of industrial centre where they would learn a craft and be under the control of sympathetic sisters than they be put to the shame that might be theirs in a home in the hard world outside, wher they would learn their origin before they had been given the opportunity to outlive it and to form their character.

Upstairs in the rambling house in Glenamaddy were thirty-three babies, children such as one might see in any nursery in the land. They were brought out in the sunshine to be photographed, and they gurgled gleefully as they sucked "sugar-barley" and played joyfully with the two young mothers who kept watch over them. One day, these little mites, if they survive the rigours of life in such a home will be projected into life. They will have to start with a heavy handicap. That handicap should be lessened as much as it is humanly possible to lessen it. Their care is a grave responsibility, an done cannot but feel unbounded admiration for these wonderful motherly nuns, who know every child ny name

The Bon Secours order was first established during the persecution of the Church in France, when Catholic clergymen found it difficult to make their way to the bedside of sick or dying members of their flock. It is essentially a nursing order, and its members are trained and qualified nurses. The work of the nuns in Glenamaddy is beyond praise; but no-one realises as keenly as they do themselves the enormous difficulties under which they perform it.

The mortality has been low: a few of the older children died from whooping cough, but the death rate among the infants has been higher than it ought to have been because of the difficulty of rearing motherless babies. Whenever possible, mothers should be sent with their charges. It is the negation of justice that nameless little ones should be sent to a home, whilst their parents go free of responsibility

Delicacy precludes one from dealing with more intimate details, but enough has been said to show the necessity for a bigger and brighter home, and to make out a case for the removal to Tuam without a moment's unnecessary delay

Tuam workhouse is at the moment occupied by about a score soldiers. It should be possible to place these in a detached wing of the building quite apart from the main body, or to accommodate them elsewhere in order that a place might be found for one of the most noble, charitable and important works in the social life and welfare of County Galway.