Adopt and Open Approach to Historic Secret
Irish American Child Legacy needs State Help to Unravel, says Valerie O'Brien

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History and story-telling is something that we, as Irish people, think we are good at but many realise now there are some stories that get told more readily than others. In the wake of the recent Ryan, Murphy and McAleese reports, many previously untold stories have come forth.

Stephen Frear’s film “Philomena” shines a light on another aspect of Irish life in need of urgent attention. It has brought the story of the clandestine adoption of Irish children by US families to the fore. These stories have been both ‘known’ and ‘unknown’ here in Ireland. Mike Milotte’s book ‘Banished Babies’ suggests that at least 2,400 children were adopted in the period from early 1940’s to early 1970’s. These children are now adults predominantly in their 50’s and 60’s and their mothers are elderly. We know that many have been searching for their Irish families and likewise many Irish families have been searching for their lost children.

The stories of the adoptions are invariably linked with unplanned pregnancies and the very limited options open to young women in Ireland at the time. Unplanned pregnancy can still be a major shock but, historically, it was greeted as a great trauma with very limited and stark options open to the single woman who found herself pregnant. If marriage was not a possibility or wanted, the ‘situation’ necessitated a solution that would deal with the sin, shame and secrecy associated with her ‘condition’. The fathers were kept largely invisible by a society who saw a role for a father only if marriage was an option.

It was as a result of these circumstances that banishment to the ‘Mother and Baby Homes’, run by different religious orders came into being. The most well-known ‘Homes’ were located in places such as Bessborough in Cork, Castlepollard in Westmeath, Stamullen in Meath, St Patricks in Dublin and “Sean Ross” abbey in Roscreawhich features in Philomena Lee’s true story.

For some women, these homes may have offered a lifeline but for others, as depicted in the film, experiences were characterised by trauma, humiliation, fear and slavery. The pain of the birth of their children was seen as God’s punishment for their sin and was rarely acknowledged by the family who put them into these institutions or the communities in which they had lived and become pregnant. The method of separation of young mothers from their children – so movingly portrayed in this film – remains a shocking reminder of how awful the reality was and why it remains a life-long pain that many mothers and children endure in isolation.

There were, no doubt, some good outcomes for children placed with families in the USA, but the manner in which these adoptions occurred raise many questions. There are still many unknowns including the actual number of children sent and the age range of the children. We
do know that many mothers minded their children into toddlerhood and beyond, but there is evidence that many American adoptive families were not told that the child being given to them had been cared for in this way by its mother. The story of a poor orphan fitted more easily with a problem that needed to ‘go away.’ Also, the extent to which mothers were told that their children were being sent to USA is far from clear and the issue of how consents were given and understood are a central concern. This aspect has a resonance with recent stories about Irish adoption from countries such as Vietnam and Mexico. The fact that Ireland finally joined the Hague Convention in 2010 is a welcome step forward but does not necessarily eliminate the darker suspicions about inter-country adoption. It is for this reason that we, as a society, have to link our past history with present practices and in the process be open to the lessons that need to be learned.

The time has surely come to open up the Irish American adoption stories. Knowing who you are is a basic human right. It is essential that all legal impediments are removed and the adopted person’s difficult task of searching for their origins is facilitated actively. The people involved do not have time on their side and both the State and religious organisations have a part to play in resolving the very real difficulties faced in the adoption search.

So, where do we start? We know that the religious orders created a record for each Irish child sent abroad. The children travelled on Irish passports in their original birth names issued by the relevant Irish authorities. The children were subsequently adopted in the USA following their arrival. Their adopted families usually had access to documentation containing the original names.

The adopted people who are fortunate enough to have access to the documentation giving their original name are generally able to access information and resources both in Ireland and in the USA. The many adoptees who do not know their original name have experienced particular challenges in dealing with institutions, a position compounded if they were adopted in one of the USA states which continues to seal adoption records. There is also a cohort of people whose real names were misrepresented on official documents and unravelling the truth of their cases is particularly hard.

Likewise, the obstacles facing mothers like Philomena Lee and their families who wish to search for siblings, cousins and nieces or nephews are also immense. Who can they turn to when denied access to information, what are they entitled to ask for and who in this state’s institutions holds the responsibility to help with search and reunion?

There are many Philomena Lees and adopted children and, to do the right thing as a society, we need to prioritise and address this. There are complexities involved, but search and reunion is a topic that needs urgent and decisive action and resolution. A number of government departments and religious organisations are involved and an urgent co-ordinated approach, involving all interested parties, is required. As the year of the ‘gathering’ draws to an end, we need to ensure that all the people involved in the Irish American adoptions are assisted in getting to the point of their own ‘Gathering.’ We should thank story writer Martin Sixsmith, who first investigated Philomena’s story and wrote the book that the film is based upon; actress Judi Dench, who played Philomena; and Frears for reminding us of what needs to be done.
Note at end: Valerie O'Brien is a lecturer in the School of Applied Social Science in University College Dublin. She has been involved in researching inter-country adoption since 2010, along with Joyce Maguire Pavao, Boston.