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Foreign Adoption in Ireland: A Case Study of the Irish-American Adoptions, 1947–1952

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Abstract

The Irish-American adoptions were a revolutionary way of dealing with Ireland’s problem of the illegitimate child. Ireland had long been promoted as a Catholic, and thus, a morally pure country. Having a child out of wedlock often resulted in the mother and child being shunned by their family and community and having little choice but to seek the help of church-run institutions. These institutions began facilitating illegal extraterritorial adoptions in 1947 to relieve mounting pressures as those seeking their help continued to grow annually. These adoptions were heavily concerned with protecting the religious faith of the child, and this often took prominence over the quality of the home. The adoptions were facilitated exclusively by these church-run institutions, allowing for complete control over the selection of prospective parents. The standards of these adoptions fell well below what was expected on the U.S. domestic scale, with no visits to the homes of prospective parents, and, crucially, there was no way to facilitate the reversal of an adoption. During the early life of the Irish-American adoptions, the Irish Department of External Affairs had little involvement and only issued passports for children that had been adopted. However, this changed in 1951, as the ‘Jane Russell Case’ attracted front-page media attention. The Russell case highlights the lackadaisical approach of many of those within the department to exporting some of Ireland’s youngest citizens. Undue publicity continued in the early 1950s, notably with the German newspaper, 8 Uhr Blatt. It is this media attention that forced the department to finally address the glaring issues that severely hindered the success of Irish-American adoptions. The department was powerless to do anything once the child had been passed into the care of the adoptive parents. The Adoption Act of 1952 marked a major turning point in the care of illegitimate children in Ireland. Legal adoption was opened on the domestic and international fronts. The conditions and standards of the Irish-American adoptions improved dramatically under this act as requirements for adoption were officially put in place, and while they still had their issues, the standard of these adoptions continued to improve through their latter stages.

Keywords: Adoption; Extraterritorial; Illegal alien children; Illegitimate children--Legal status, laws, etc.; Proselytism; Standards; Republic of Ireland

*Ireland enjoys quite a reputation as a place where one can get children for adoption without much difficulty.*¹

Joe Horan,
Irish Department of External Affairs, 1950.

The first officially recorded adoption of an Irish child by an American couple took place in Ireland in 1947.² This marked the beginning of a wave of foreign adoptions of Irish children over the next two decades, which would be dominated by Irish-American adoptions. The removal of a child from its birth family and its placement into the care of a family that is not its own has been practiced in many societies for centuries. Children have been taken into homes on a permanent or temporary basis, formally or informally and with or without official sanction, to begin life with a new family across different societies. However, the removal of a child from its birth family, whether consensual or not, had no legal standing without the passage of necessary legislation. While the United States passed its first adoption legislation in 1851, Ireland did not pass its first adoption law until 1952. The increasing number of illegitimate children born in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century led to a need to find a way of relieving the associated pressures on both families and church or state-run institutions. Since adoption in Ireland was not legalised until 1952, there was little option but to seek relief elsewhere, ultimately paving the way for the Irish-American adoptions that have gained notoriety in the media in recent years.³ This is a relatively untouched portion of Irish societal history, but is crucial in understanding twentieth-century childcare, social care and church-state relations.

U.S. Domestic and Foreign Adoption

The adoption climate in the United States throughout the mid-twentieth century forced many couples to look abroad if they intended to offer a child a home. Adoption had been legalised in parts of the US from as early as 1851—over a century earlier than in Ireland—but was not without controversy.⁴ Schemes such as ‘Orphan Train’ and ‘Placing Out’ attracted undue attention regarding poor living conditions or work-for-board initiatives that often accompanied such arrangements. The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by what is termed ‘Progressivism’. It spread across the United States and heralded reform as modernisation and political change were embraced. Social reform came to the fore and, by extension, the first White House Conference on Children was held in 1909. This conference advocated family life as ‘the finest product of civilisation’, leading to the promotion of rehoming destitute or illegitimate children on a permanent basis and marking a shift away from institutionalism.⁵ One of the primary organisations in improving and eventually standardising adoption in the U.S. was the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), established in 1921. The CWLA unified and improved the fragmentary and unorganised system that preceded it. Previously, adoptions had been undertaken without any

¹ Letter from Joe Horan to James Molloy, 21 November 1950, Adoption Policy Files, 345/96/I, National Archives of Ireland.

² Cecil Barrett, *Adoption: the parent, the child, the home*, Dublin: Burns, Oats and Washbourne, 1952, p. 9.

³ The Irish-American adoptions have been the topic of a number of articles in national newspapers. For example, *Irish Times*, 28 June 2014, and *Irish Examiner*, 13 September 2014. The adoptions have also been covered in documentaries by RTE and the BBC including *Ireland’s Lost Babies* (2014), and were the subject of the movie *Philomena* in 2013.

⁴ Adoption was first passed in 1851 in Massachusetts with the 1851 Adoption of Children Act.

⁵ 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children, Michigan Library online archives, Michigan, <http://bit.ly/2g6Mc6L>.

standardisation, staff training and, in some cases, no record keeping.⁶ It was this that the CWLA was established to combat, and in 1938 it issued its first set of minimum adoption standards.⁷

While the CWLA improved adoption practices substantially, problems still persisted. The American adoption system was long and arduous and the conditions set out by the CWLA meant that many prospective adoptive parents were ineligible for consideration, often on the grounds of health, income or age. A black market for the sale of children had existed for decades, such as the ‘baby-farms’ that ran throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. In the eyes of the sellers and buyers, babies were simply seen as commodities that yielded substantial rewards. Many couples who were deemed ineligible to adopt by the CWLA or who were frustrated with the waiting time of the official process sought a child through illegal avenues. However, many others also began to look abroad for adoption opportunities. Ireland proved an attractive alternative to the U.S. for several reasons. Servicemen from the United States Army had been adopting children throughout and after the two world wars, so foreign adoption was certainly not a new phenomenon. Yet the extraterritorial adoption of children from continental Europe and Britain proved increasingly difficult in the aftermath of World War II, with many countries unwilling to facilitate the migration of their youngest citizens. Owing to Ireland’s policy of neutrality, population losses during World War II were restricted to the small percentage of Irish citizens that had joined the British Army and thus, losses were insignificant. Ireland also proved an attractive alternative as it had an oversupply of children seeking families.

The Irish-American Adoptions

The lack of a legalised adoption process in Ireland ensured many children were confined to church- or state-run institutions, notably mother and baby homes as well as industrial schools, with little chance of a familial upbringing. Year after year, the number of new-born illegitimate children increased, meaning more and more children were in need of homes. The pressure placed on institutions was mounting, and the primary problem for mother and baby homes at the time was dealing with the vast number of incoming applications for admission.⁸ It was impossible for each institution to accept every application for aid, and workers aimed to avoid separating mothers from their babies to relieve pressure on the home as well as for the welfare of the child.⁹ If mother and child could not be kept together, whether because of financial or familial difficulties, the adoption agency would act as an advisory bureau, offering solutions such as fosterage with a family member or a place in an industrial school after each individual case was investigated. What hindered the possible rehoming of the children was the lack of foster mothers and of adoptive families. While adoption was not legalised until 1952 in Ireland, adoptions did occur on an informal basis. The difficulty in finding suitable foster mothers had been deemed the greatest worry of all for rescue workers by Fr Cecil Barrett.¹⁰ Barrett was charged with tackling this problem for the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society by Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid in 1946 and became the figurehead of a nationwide foster drive. The campaign took place principally in provincial and national newspapers and was responsible for a significant increase in

⁶ Child Welfare League of America, Constitution 1921, University of Oregon online archives, Oregon, <http://bit.ly/2gz8CLY>.

⁷ Adoptions, a statement of the problems, 1937, University of Oregon online archives, Oregon, <http://bit.ly/2fST9Fy>.

⁸ Letter from Cecil Barrett to Chris Mangan, 29 May 1951, *McQuaid Papers*, Adoption File 2, Lii/A/26/2/(i), Dublin Diocesan Archives.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

adoptions and discharges in several mother and baby homes, notably St. Patrick’s Guild, Middle Abbey Street. From Fig.1 (see below), it is clear that the campaign was largely successful, with a sixty-one percent increase in adoptions and a twenty percent increase in discharges between the year before the campaign started (1945) and the year after it came into effect (1947). While 1950 seems to be a disappointing year in comparison to other years after the campaign, its results are due to a change in secretary ship at the beginning of the year. The results in 1951 returned to similar levels to those in the years after the campaign was started, with thirty-one adoptions taking place in the first five months of the year.¹¹

Year	Discharges	Adoptions	New Cases	Cases in Book
1950	48	23	72	267
1949	91	60	64	239
1948	107	74	74	270
1947	93	71	86	309
1946	76	76	61	319
1945	77	44	57	359
1944	45	19	57	379
1943	28	15	62	367
1942	68	25	61	337
1941	68	25	47	340
1940	66	27	63	356
1939	57	36	54	359

Fig. 1: The number of discharges, adoptions, new cases and total cases of St. Patrick’s Guild, Middle Abbey Street, from 1939 – 1950. It is difficult to compare St. Patrick’s Guild to other homes, as there are no other records available or accessible.

Despite the relative success of the campaign, the number of total cases on the books of St. Patrick’s Guild, and indeed on the books of many other homes, still far outweighed the number of discharges and adoptions. An alternative had to be found, and, after the first Irish-American adoption in 1947, increasing these adoptions seemed to be a good solution for decreasing Ireland’s oversupply of illegitimate children. The number of Irish-American adoptions in the coming years increased dramatically, with 143 adoptions in the archdiocese of Dublin between 1949 and 1951.¹² The adoptions were certainly not restricted to the archdiocese of Dublin, as we can see from a recorded 123 passports issued to Catholic and non-Catholic children by the Irish Department of External Affairs between November 1950 and November 1951.¹³ It is impossible to know how the situation in the Dublin archdiocese

¹¹ Data collected from a letter from Fr Barrett to Fr Mangan, 29 May 1951, *McQuaid Papers*, Adoption File 2, Lii/A/26/(ii), Dublin Diocesan Archives.

¹² ‘American Adoptions’, undated, *McQuaid Papers*, Adoption File 1, Lii/A/19/I, Dublin Diocesan Archives.

¹³ *Ibid.*

compares to the situation elsewhere before November 1950, as the Department of External Affairs did not keep separate records for Irish children going to America before this date.¹⁴

While it would often take several years to adopt a child in America, an adoption could be organised in a matter of weeks in Ireland, as was the case in 1949 when Rollie McDowell, an American businessman, touched down in Ireland and left with two children just two weeks later.¹⁵ What was most startling about the McDowell adoption was the fact he was able to organise the adoption and remove the children from the country without his wife’s knowledge, returning to America to surprise her.¹⁶ The case received widespread media coverage, particularly across the Atlantic and notably in the *Chicago Tribune*. The newspaper reported that McDowell found the children in the first orphanage he visited and they were the first children he saw. The ease with which McDowell acquired these children brings into question what precautions were taken in the placement of these and many other children before Archbishop McQuaid put regulations in place. Another revelation in the McDowell case was his statement: ‘How nice it is to surprise your wife occasionally’.¹⁷ The fact that McDowell deemed the permanent adoption of two children an occasional surprise brings into question the quality of home in which the children would spend their childhood. The willingness of the orphanage to place the children in the permanent care of Rollie McDowell without first meeting his wife—who would no doubt play a huge role in their lives—also draws into question the quality of the placement. This specific case mirrors a problem that continued throughout the lifetime of the Irish-American adoptions: how could the quality and safety of a placement be guaranteed with the child being placed thousands of miles away from the orphanage?

In 1950, Archbishop McQuaid produced a set of conditions for all Irish-American adoptions, which were circulated to the homes facilitating these adoptions and are the earliest of their kind:

- 1) Prospective adoptive parents must have a written recommendation from the Director of Catholic Charities in the diocese in which they live.
- 2) They must supply for inspection their baptismal and marriage certificates.
- 3) They must have a written recommendation from the parish priest of their parish.
- 4) They must submit a statement of their material circumstances with a guarantee as to their income, so as to ensure a good home and good prospects in life for the adopted child.
- 5) They must submit medical certificates stating their ages, that they are in good health, physically and mentally, and that they are not deliberately shirking natural parenthood.
- 6) They must swear an affidavit to the effect that they, as Catholics, guarantee to rear the adopted child as Catholic, that they undertake to educate the child during the whole course of its schooling in Catholic schools, that if in the future the child is sent to university, it will be sent to a Catholic university, that they undertake to keep the adopted child permanently and not hand it over to any other party or parties.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ‘Surprise She’s Mother of Boy, Girl’ *Chicago Tribune*, 29 July 1949, p.1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ‘Procedure in regard to applications that an Irish child be adopted by and American family’, undated, Adoption File 1, Lii/A/20/1, Dublin Diocesan Archives.

Upon fulfilling these conditions, the application was passed onto the archbishop for his approval. If the archbishop approved the adoption, the adoption agency was notified and the adoption facilitated.¹⁹ It is clear that approval was largely based on the religious background of the adopting couple. While some requirements gave limited assurances about the family home, including the recommendation from the parish priest and guarantee of material circumstances, it fell a long way below the standards in place for domestic adoptions in the US. Along with the difficulties in ensuring the quality of a placement, the fact that the child was housed so far from the adoption agency meant it was unable to reverse placements that had already taken place or to adequately deal with any adoption that failed. In effect, the guarantee of the adopted child’s faith held as much (if not more) weight as the guarantee of a suitable placement and home. The need to guarantee that the adopted child would be raised as a Catholic became a dominant and consistent trait of Irish-American adoptions.

The National Conference of Catholic Charities (NCCC), an organisation based in the United States, began aiding Irish-American adoptions in 1950, supplying references for prospective adoptive couples in the US. Again, however, the standards it had put in place fell well below what was needed in guaranteeing the welfare of the child, as the focus was put on guaranteeing the child’s faith rather than its welfare. The NCCC first contacted an Irish agency, St Patrick’s Guild, regarding the Irish-American adoptions in March 1950 after a story broke in American newspapers regarding the adoption of Irish children by an American couple.²⁰ The NCCC expressed its surprise and questioned the system in place governing these international adoptions. That adoptions were facilitated by Irish agencies without any sort of reassurances from an American organisation highlights another sacrifice made by Archbishop McQuaid to keep the adoptions out of the public eye. The NCCC did, however, offer its full collaboration in any way possible, with the charity’s primary concern being ‘to preserve the faith of these youngsters’.²¹ The adoption of Irish children by American couples was met with widespread discontent within the NCCC. The directors, however, conceded that despite their best efforts, Irish children would continue to be brought into the United States. They felt they had little option but to work out the best possible arrangements for the ‘importing of children’.²² A number of new requirements were laid out, such as the need to produce a marriage certificate from church—not state— authorities. Even so, the NCCC stressed that it was not encouraging people to bring Irish children into America, but rather it was ‘simply trying to do what they can to protect the faith of the children when people are bringing them in’.²³

Owing to the newspaper stories printed in the U.S. concerning the adoption of Irish children, ‘a sufficient number of cases to cause real concern’ were identified by the NCCC, in which Irish children had been placed in the permanent care of couples that had previously been rejected for adoption by the director of the NCCC.²⁴ Even after the conditions put in place with the collaboration of the Irish church authorities and the NCCC, flaws in the system remained. While many of those rejected for adoption by the director of charities were rejected on the basis of religion, some were rejected on material wealth and age.²⁵ The system the NCCC had in place for domestic adoption in America differed largely from those in its

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Copy letter NCCC, 1346 Connecticut, Washington D.C, USA, 8 March 1950, *McQuaid Papers*, Adoption File 1, Lii/A/21/1, Dublin Diocesan Archives.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Letter from O’Grady to Barrett, 25 March 1951, *McQuaid Papers*, Adoption File 2, Lii/A/26/1, Dublin Diocesan Archives.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

collaboration with Irish adoption agencies. Domestic adoption had a much larger focus on the suitability of a prospective home to a given child. The NCCC conducted several studies on a child, including an IQ test and physical examination, to best match it to prospective parents.²⁶ Unlike the Irish-American adoptions, the NCCC often turned away prospective couples based on their age, only re-homing infants with suitably young couples. Those seeking to adopt a child through an American agency also had to be American citizens, or had at least to have shown an intention to become US citizens due to the fiercely competitive US adoption market. The most notable requirement overlooked in the Irish-American adoptions was a home inspection. While a statement of material possessions was needed, this provided no guarantee of the suitability of a given home. For domestic adoptions, the NCCC required adequate living and sleeping conditions, an easily accessible church and school, a good neighbourhood and an outdoor play area.²⁷ The NCCC also put a trial period in place for each adoption to ensure both child and adoptive parents were satisfied before legal proceedings for permanent adoption began.²⁸ Unlike the Irish-American adoptions, this allowed for the reversal of an adoption. If one or both parties were not satisfied with the placement, the child would return to the care of the adoption agency. The Irish agencies were in no way capable of facilitating such an arrangement or of dealing in any way with a failed placement.

In the early stages of the Irish-American adoptions, the Irish Department of External Affairs had little involvement beyond the issuing of passports for the adopted children. This was set to change in 1951, four years after adoptions first began. The case that has become synonymous with the Irish-American adoptions is that of Tommy Kavanagh, which was the subject of an internal investigation within the department. Tommy's mother, Florrie McDowell, had emigrated from Derry to England in the 1940s in search of work before meeting her Galway-born husband and settling in London. Jane Russell, on the other hand, was a well-known American actress and a household name to many. After a botched abortion in 1943, Russell was left infertile and, unable to naturally conceive a child, she later went on to adopt three children. Russell arrived in London in 1951 to take part in a Royal Command Performance. Upon her arrival in London, Russell announced her intention to adopt a second child in Ireland owing to the difficulties of adopting a child in the UK:

My husband is of Irish extraction and I would very much like to adopt an Irish baby. If it is possible I would like to fly to Dublin this week to pick out a child and make all the arrangements for him to fly back to America with me.²⁹

As it turned out, Russell did not have to travel to Dublin, as an Irish child, Tommy Kavanagh, was offered to her for adoption in London by his mother, Florrie. Adopting a child from an Irish family allowed Russell to bypass the stringent adoption conditions in Britain and the US. If the Kavanaghs had applied for a British passport for Tommy, their application would have been denied, as British law prohibited the adoption of a British child by a foreign couple with the exception of those permanently residing in Britain. The Kavanagh family acquired a passport through the Irish embassy with little difficulty.³⁰ Tommy's father applied for the passport in person, stating in a written declaration that it was required for the child to travel to the United States for a holiday. However, the written consent given by Tommy's father that the child would be travelling on holiday but unaccompanied by his parents later

²⁶ 'Standards in the Placement of Catholic Children for Adoption', *Report of a Special Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Charities*, Washington D.C., 1944.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Irish Times*, 30 October 1951.

³⁰ Adoption of Irish Child, Dáil Debates, 21 November 1951, Oireachtas Debates, Dublin, <http://bit.ly/2gM21AH>.

signalled alarm.³¹ Irish Minister of External Affairs, Frank Aiken, eventually deemed the transaction ‘most regrettable’ and soon after passed a new condition regarding issuing passports in Irish embassies abroad:

I have given instructions that in future, passports in respect of children are not to be issued in our offices abroad without prior reference to the heads of missions or to the Department in Dublin.³²

Despite the seriousness of the situation—which clearly highlighted the lackadaisical approach toward the issuing of passports to infants, and indeed to foreign adoptions generally—the subject was only brought up in the main house of the Irish parliament, the Dáil, on the back of newspaper reports in well-known British Sunday papers.³³ What is also striking is that a member of the Dáil, Tom Kyne, immediately identified the guarantee of the child’s faith as his primary concern. The quality of placement was not brought up in the short time devoted to the subject in the Dáil and the welfare of the child was not questioned.

The Jane Russell case was the first that truly brought the Irish-American adoptions into question due to the widespread media coverage it received. While adoption was not explicitly mentioned on the application for the passport, the Irish embassy in London contacted the Department of External Affairs informing it that a passport had been granted to an Irish child, travelling to America, and later identifying the child as the one in the ‘Jane Russell baby case’.³⁴ The coverage the case was getting in the media on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the German paper *Uhr Blatt*, was becoming a serious concern for the Department of External Affairs. The paper adopted a damning view of the Irish-American adoptions, quoting an Irish welfare worker in the UK:

Our country has today become a sort of hunting ground for foreign millionaires who believe they can acquire children to suit their whims just in the same way as they would get valuable pedigree animals. In the last few months more than one hundred children have left Ireland, without any official organisation being in a position to make any enquiries as to their future habitat.³⁵

While many within the department called for a rebuttal of the story, Joe Horan, one of the figureheads within the department regarding the Irish-American adoptions, believed that this course of action could not be taken, stating, ‘I have to say it is our considered opinion that no such action should be taken, more especially so since, with the exception of the figures given, the article is largely not incorrect’.³⁶ The Jane Russell case marked an unravelling of problems concerning the Irish-American adoptions within the Department of External Affairs. Horan, in an internal memo, stated that while the department was aware of adoptions that had taken place with the aid of Irish passports, it was not aware of those adoptions that had taken place without the need for a passport. The ease with which a child could be removed from the country was evident: ‘Once they have the child, there is nothing stopping them getting on the boat at Dun Laoghaire or the plane at Collinstown’.³⁷ Once a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Deputy Kyne’s question regarding Thomas Kavanagh and Jane Russell, Adoption Policy Files, 345/96/I, National Archives of Ireland.

³⁵ Letter from O’Beirne to Deputy Secretary, 19 Dec 1951, Adoption Policy Files, 345/164, National Archives of Ireland.

³⁶ Letter from Joe Horan to Deputy Secretary, 14 Jan 1952, Papers of the Department of External Affairs, Adoption File, 345/96/I, National Archives of Ireland.

³⁷ Letter from Horan to Woods, 31 Dec 1951, *Papers of the Department of External Affairs*, Adoption File, 345/96/I, National Archives of Ireland.

child had left the country without a passport, it was impossible to trace them. Horan went on to voice his concerns on the black-market sale of children for adoption in America. There had long been a demand for child adoptions that could not be met on a domestic scale, so the sale of children became a profitable business. While many of the notorious baby farms had ceased to exist by this time, the sale of children was still a popular business model for many. What concerned the Department of External Affairs was the possibility of Irish children being adopted in Ireland and then sold in America, as well as the inevitable ensuing political and media storm. If any baby-selling ring involving Irish children was discovered, Horan noted, ‘It is we who would be held responsible as it is we who have to answer parliamentary questions, face a press campaign and so on’.³⁸

The Adoption Act, 1952

Adoption in Ireland was legalised on both the domestic and international front with the 1952 Adoption Act. This act marked a major jump forward in the standards of care of illegitimate children. Concrete standards were put in place to ensure adoptions were carried out to a much improved level, and of course the act officially legalised adoption, improving the rights of child and guardian significantly. It was thought within the Department of External Affairs that legalised domestic adoption would put an end to the Irish-American adoptions, which was reflected by Joe Horan when he stated: ‘The Adoption Act will put an end to the taking of illegitimates and orphans out of the country by non-nationals’.³⁹ However, this was not the case. While the act did not put an end to overseas adoptions, it did attempt to regulate them with restrictions such as requiring the child to be between one and seven years of age, and receiving the necessary consent of a parent or guardian.⁴⁰ From the early stages of drafting the Adoption Act, the Catholic Church was heavily involved. This is unsurprising, owing to the overwhelming majority of illegitimate children housed in church-run institutions as well as the state’s concern with religion in adoption. An episcopal committee was established to advise the Department of Justice in writing up the act. Section 40 of the act, ‘Restriction on sending children abroad’, was a safeguard suggested by this episcopal committee, composed by Archbishop McQuaid and sent to the Minister of Justice. The suggestion stated, ‘that it should be an offence to send or allow to be sent out of the state a child who is a national unless such action is taken directly by the parents or by the natural mother of the child’. This suggestion was put into place to stop adoption agencies from sending children across the border to Northern Ireland into the care of a Protestant family and risking the danger of proselytism. While the Adoption Act legalised domestic adoption, it in no way stopped extraterritorial adoptions. The reason for this was clear, the Catholic Church exercised almost complete control of international adoptions and, thus, was able to guarantee the faith of the child. While mixed marriage couples were unable to adopt a child legally in Ireland, there was always a risk that the unregulated adoption societies would place a child in the care of a Protestant couple.⁴¹

Conclusion

The Irish-American adoptions were littered with problems from their inception, but it would be naïve to dismiss them entirely as a viable solution to Ireland’s ‘problem of the illegitimate child’. The adoptions, in their earliest stages, were severely hampered by the lacklustre

³⁸ Letter from Horan to Molloy, 4 Jan 1952, *Papers of the Department of External Affairs*, Adoption File, 345/96/I, National Archives of Ireland.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Adoption Act, 1952.

⁴¹ The term ‘mixed marriage couple’ is used here to refer to a husband and wife of differing religions.

conditions set out by those that facilitated them. The lack of home study reports and screening of prospective parents was inexcusable, but the standards and regulations of the adoptions did improve dramatically over the next decade, bringing them in line with domestic adoptions.⁴² These extraterritorial adoptions, in effect, ensured the child would be brought up in a familial environment, rather than in an institution which would likely have been the case if they remained in Ireland. If the more concrete standards that were imposed by the mid-1950s had been in place from the outset, they may well have proved to be a success. The lack of foster families and legalised adoption in the 1940s and into the 1950s meant that many children were confined to life in an institution, but the Irish-American adoptions offered a life in a family home that had previously been unavailable. While the need for these extraterritorial adoptions after the passing of the Adoption Act is questionable, the standard of placements did improve dramatically and the pressure on mother and baby homes, as well as on other institutions, continued to ease. In 1958, the standards and regulations of these adoptions was once again dramatically improved, with the adoption of the first set of concrete professional standards across all societies. If these standards had been brought into effect at an earlier stage, the Irish-American adoptions may well have been hailed as a success, rather than being marred by sub-standard and lacklustre practices. Youth-work and by extension, adoption, is at the very fore of the history of social care. The Irish-American adoptions are crucial in our understanding of the development of mid twentieth century social care, the intricate ties between Church and State and the changing thoughts towards illegitimacy. It is necessary to undertake a study of both domestic and foreign adoptions to gauge this importance. It is hoped this article can go some way to obtaining at least part of this.

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⁴² Adoption Act, 1952.

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