



by Dermot Bolger

WHEN my father passed away, after six decades living in the same house, my siblings and I cleared out his home, dumping furniture and keeping precious mementos. When we thought we were finished, someone suggested that we check the attic.

We didn't expect to find anything, but we were wrong. One small bag was stored there: the handbag our mother took with her when entering the Richmond Hospital in 1969 for an operation on a tumour from which she never recovered.

To a stranger, its contents – lipstick, letters, the scribbled addresses of fellow patients – would seem mundane. But to my father (who kept them untouched for half a century) and to us, this bag was precious because it contained her personal effects, the everyday items she picked to bring with her on her final journey.

Not far from the Richmond Hospital (yet so different as to belong to a different world) another hospital existed. Initially called the Richmond Asylum, it became known as St Brendan's or, simply, Grange-gorman. That site will soon become a hub of youthful activity as the new campus for the Dublin Institute of Technology.

But following the closure of St Brendan's, numerous similar bags were located in its attics: piles of once precious personal correspondence, photographs of loved ones and religious medals and beads which scared patients had brought with them when admitted there. These bags were taken from them, to be returned when they were discharged – if they were ever signed out by relations.

Copious official records exist about what occurred during the 200 years of Grange-gorman's existence.

But these attics provided an unofficial history, hidden in dusty handbags never claimed by families; in the personal effects of long dead patients who were forgotten about behind those high walls.

Their existence of this treasure trove came to light while the late Mary Raftery was making a documentary about the secret world of Ireland's mental hospitals during the 20th century.

The artist, Alan Counihan, found himself deeply affected by their discovery: both as an artist and a citizen. He has since embarked on a crusade to preserve a representative sample of those artefacts from forgotten lives. He now presents the results of his research in a unique, deeply moving exhibition, entitled *Personal Effects: A History of Possessions*, at the remarkable Axis Art Centre on Ballymun's Main Street.

Everyone who ever had a relation cared for in St Brendan's or a neighbour who disappeared behind its walls or who simply wants to understand 20th century Ireland should visit this exhibition. The exhibits – shoes, bags, letters and photographs of anonymous patients – are displayed in altered ways to bear witness to the experiences of their former owners within that famous Grange-gorman institution. These ordinary objects are rendered extraordinary in Counihan's exhibition; he infuses them with new meaning to represent inner lives no less rich or remarkable than the lives lived outside those walls. His hope is that they will reveal as much about us as a society as about their owners who we locked away.

Counihan is passionate about the subject of those hidden lives – a world also explored in the forthcoming film of Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture*. For Counihan the exhibition is 'about human dignity and its denial and the dangers such denial poses'.

'The process of such denial and who should bear responsibility for it is nuanced. The institutions took care of many people that families did not care about and who never bothered to collect their belongings. Thousands were institutionalised. In 1958, Ireland had, per capita, the highest rate of hospitalisation of those deemed to be suffering from mental illness in the world. Many of those committed were ill. Many more were not.' Counihan finds it hard to even

A wonderful new exhibition pulls back the veil on a mental institution and the possessions its patients had to surrender

Forgotten relics of lives written off as 'lunatics' and 'imbeciles'

conceive of what a nightmare St Brendan's was for inmates of sound mind who knew they shouldn't be there, but had no way of knowing, in the rigid conformity of Fifties Ireland, if they would enjoy personal freedom again.

He describes how every bag in those attics still had a key for a house or flat elsewhere, and contained at least one set of rosary beads. He says that 'prayer books, holy pictures and crucifixes comprise a large portion of the personal effects left in the hospital. Faith and its rituals were clearly a great support for many.'

'Perhaps the sublimation of suffering central to Catholic doctrine made the experience of suffering more bearable in such a place of personal isolation.'

THE deeper he researches those lost lives, the more complicated he realises that Grange-gorman's history becomes. 'If the institutional system was heartless,' he says, 'many of those who worked within it were not. However the care provided by staff was inevitably compromised by the machination of the system.'

'The Richmond Lunatic Asylum' was Ireland's first public mental hospital in Ireland, opened in 1815. A pioneering institution, it was a vast improvement on workhouses where an 'insane lunatic' was frequently chained to the same bed as a sane pauper: both so constrained that they gradually lost the use of their limbs.

The conditions in the Asylum were horrific for patients in the 19th century, but not much better for staff, who were also locked in and allowed to see their families for only a few hours each week.

There are reports of nurses being drunk in that asylum where their daily wage was the price of a gentleman's newspaper. Broken in health after a lifetime's service, they were evicted without a pension and faced the choice of applying to be readmitted as patients or become inmates in a workhouse.

Dysentery, typhoid and cholera flourished in the Richmond.

Reports called for its closure in the 1860s, but inmates continued to flood in: we could not find places fast enough to lock away our problems. Many patients were unmarried older sisters or aunts discreetly dispatched to spend decades locked away in overcrowded wards. More precise

patient definitions were drawn up before the First World War, when the statutory use of the term 'lunatic' was dropped. These new terms included 'imbeciles', 'idiots' and 'epileptics' – termed as 'persons who, being epileptic, were also mentally defective'

For most of the 20th century little changed. Staff continued to battle against public indifference and official meanness. In the Fifties, Grange-gorman remained a drab, custodial overcrowded institution. Its board reacted with outrage to any press reports on true conditions and their inspection report for 1960 makes for deluded reading: 'It is heartening to see some patients able to sit before a bright fire. The corridors look very bright with the many colours of paint, although some of the colours do not blend. We agreed it is better to have colours that clash than no paint at all...'

Irish psychiatric care has been transformed in recent decades, which is not to excuse ongoing failings or ignore the fact that it remains hugely under-resourced. The old Grange-gorman is being submerged into the new DIT campus. But thanks to Alan Counihan, and the individuals and bodies who helped him in his quest to reclaim lost lives, we have these poignant reminders of the people who disappeared behind high walls and whose belongings were never claimed after death.

Counihan initially wondered why patients wore a motley array of poorly fitting clothes.

He only learned, through conversation with retired staff, that patients had to wear whatever clothes came back to their ward from the laundry. Frequently the clothes they wore were not their own.

But whatever else was taken from them, their true identities remained in those handbags that were confiscated when they were admitted; in the personal effects they were denied access to.

And now, for all those people whose sense of self-worth was so brutally stripped away, this remarkable exhibition has reclaimed their past and given them back the dignity, in death, that they were callously denied when they were alive.

● *Personal Effects: A History of Possessions* runs at the Axis Art Centre, Ballymun, Dublin, until Friday. It is open from noon and admission is free. See www.axisballymun.ie



Lives reclaimed: A handbag at Axis, Ballymun

Picture: CHRIS BACON