

Sunday Business Post. 08/06/2014.

It's time that dissenting voices were listened to

03:55, 8 June 2014 by Colin Murphy

A small exhibition in Dublin this week tells a big story that we need to hear. At the core of the exhibition is a collection of women's handbags. Old, faded handbags, and their mundane contents: house keys; glasses; rosary beads; letters.

The handbags belonged to women committed to St Brendan's Hospital in Grangegorman, Dublin, formerly the Richmond Lunatic Asylum. On admission to the hospital, their personal effects were taken from them, labelled, and stored. These belongings were returned when the patient left; where the patient never left, the belongings remained in storage, forgotten.

The existence of these artefacts, alongside voluminous archives from St Brendan's and other hospitals, was revealed in a documentary by the late Mary Raftery, *Behind the Walls*, in 2011. That provoked a community effort to salvage them and, as part of that, artist Alan Counihan has curated a small sample, with an accompanying slideshow, in an exhibition running at Culture Box in Temple Bar, titled *Personal Effects: A History of Possession*.

In the hospital's records, Counihan found an account of a 17-year-old girl sent there from the Magdalen Laundry in Donnybrook, committed to the "asylum" for being disruptive in the laundry. Among the personal effects, he found a letter from a father, presumably a patient, to his wife, who had moved to a mother and baby home in his absence.

By the 1950s, there were more people living in psychiatric institutions in Ireland (pro rata) than anywhere else in the world. The McAleese report on the Magdalen laundries found records of 11,000 women who lived in the laundries between 1922 and 1996; on any one night in the 1950s, there was double that number of people within the residential psychiatric system (this is according to Dr Damien Brennan's Irish

Insanity 1800-2000).

As Counihan's exhibition demonstrates, that system was interwoven with those other systems of institutionalisation, the laundries and mother and baby homes. No doubt, all three were interwoven also with the industrial school system: the children of parents committed to asylums were likely to have been sent to industrial schools, particularly if poor.

In some, perhaps many, cases, these institutions gave necessary care to vulnerable people who had nowhere else to go. But they also provided Irish society with a way of dealing with those who were difficult, or deviant, or who dissented in some way from society's mores: people who weren't to be trusted; people Counihan refers to in the programme for his exhibition as "the inconvenient".

There are plenty of the inconvenient still around today – fortunately. Sergeant Maurice McCabe and former Garda John Wilson were a decided inconvenience to the Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice as they attempted to draw attention to failings within the force. Before them, Frank Shortt proved a similar inconvenience in Donegal. Independent TDs Clare Daly, Mick Wallace and Luke Flanagan, and others, have made themselves inconvenient within the Oireachtas, challenging established precedents and championing awkward issues. Within the Department of Finance, prior to the crash, civil servant Marie Mackle wrote inconvenient memos questioning the official line that the "fundamentals" were sound.

The response of the establishment in these cases was analogous to the response of wider Irish society to those who were placed in psychiatric institutions. The dissenters were ignored, at first; and when they could no longer be ignored, they were disciplined, or marginalised, or silenced.

It is tempting to simply blame the people at the head of those institutions for this, as it is tempting to blame the Catholic Church for what happened in the laundries and mother and baby homes, and to blame individual doctors or families for the wrongful or needless incarceration of people in psychiatric institutions.

But what's more insidious is that much of this repressive response to dissent was facilitated, or even driven, by a wider consensus.

The Guerin Report makes clear that the Department of Justice simply didn't take Maurice McCabe seriously: senior counsel Seán Guerin found "no evidence of any detailed assessment within the Department" of his allegations.

Peter Nyberg, who conducted an inquiry into the banking crisis, came to believe that there was "a strong belief in Ireland that contrarians, non-team players, fractious observers and whistleblowers would be informally (though sometimes even publicly) sanctioned or ignored". We need to learn to listen to, and value, dissenting voices. This will require two things: rigorous analysis of the past, so as to understand what happened; and a leap of imagination, so as to apply that understanding to apparently unrelated issues in the future. That analysis may best come in the form of a statutory inquiry – not merely into the mother and baby homes, but also into the wildly excessive use of psychiatric institutions (as Damien Brennan has recommended). But a leap of imagination requires more intimate reflection, and Counihan's exhibition may be the kind of thing that triggers it.

The patients of St Brendan's are now gone, and soon they will be replaced by students of the Dublin Institute of Technology, which is moving to the vast Grangegorman campus now being built. As a massive public works project, there is a large budget for arts and culture spending: currently €400,000, anticipated to rise to more than double that. The first priority for that money should be to create a permanent home for the documents and personal effects that are all that's left of the former residents of 'the Gorman'.

That may return to those artefacts, and their owners, some of the dignity that was taken from them in life. And it may remind us that "inconvenience" is something we need to cherish, not spurn.

*Colin Murphy is a journalist and scriptwriter. He is currently adapting his play *Guaranteed!* for television*