

'Just a furious, helpless roar'

'Shame on this country! Shame on England!' Thus novelist Hilary Mantel concludes a reflection on the case of Baby Peter, the focus of a national furore over child protection services in Haringey, in the light of her personal experiences as a trainee social worker in Stockport more than 30 years ago.¹ Mantel echoes what she describes as 'just a furious, helpless roar' that issued from the mouth of a woman, 'young, blonde, bawling', captured in a television news report of one of the protests demanding punitive measures against the social workers and doctors who were blamed for failing to prevent this child being tortured and killed.

Mantel describes herself as the sort of 'more thoughtful person' who 'doesn't usually agree with the things the spontaneous shout in the street', and still less with 'the vengeful vox pop outside courtrooms'. But in this case the literary snob feels drawn towards the common mob and patrician condescension gives way to endorsement of the anti-professional prejudices fomented by the tabloid press. 'Maybe it's time to stop being sentimental about the family', she concludes, implicitly endorsing the consensus that it is time for a more intrusive and coercive official policy towards the families of the inner city poor.

In the same week that Mantel's cry of national shame was heard in London, the report of the Ryan commission into the physical and sexual abuse of children in institutions² run by religious orders in Ireland provoked strikingly similar responses from both public and private figures who expressed their shame at being Irish and at being Catholic.³ In both Britain and Ireland the intensity of moral outrage over child abuse reflects the bad faith of societies that in the past denied the reality of abuse and are now inclined to see it everywhere.

Although the findings of the Ryan commission were widely received as shocking revelations, in substance the report contained little that was not already widely known. The conditions in the residential 'industrial schools' for the children of the poor had been exposed by a long line of whistleblowers going back to the 1940s.⁴ Yet the system continued, protected by the power of the state and the church and public denial. The Irish journalist John Waters notes the 'ritualistic

expressions of shock, horror, disapproval' that recur in response to periodic revelations about institutional abuse.⁵ The intensity of ostentatious outrage 'becomes an almost precise replication of the earlier denial'. As he recognises, 'it is not that the scales have been lifted from the eyes of society, but that, as a result of the easing, by the passing of time, of collective guilt and powerlessness, a new generation feels able to ventilate and excoriate the sins of its predecessors.' Waters warns against a 'dangerous condescension to the past', and of the complacent contrast between contemporary enlightenment and the barbarous dark ages of mid-20th century Ireland. He detects in modern Ireland's 'unlimited appetite for past obscenities' a worrying indifference to evils in our midst today.

Detailed accounts of the abuse in the industrial schools now provide a sort of pornography for Ireland's chattering classes in a way similar to the Baby P case in Britain. A voyeuristic preoccupation with clerical abuse coexists with a pusillanimous reluctance to take any action to limit clerical influence in education and social welfare.

In Britain, Mantel's self-indulgent outburst is linked to an endorsement of the sort of authoritarian child protection policies that will result in more children being taken into institutional care. History, in Britain as well as in Ireland, suggests that this is unlikely to guarantee their welfare (and it will not stop some parents from killing their children).

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