



# Cultural, Autobiographical and Absent Memories of Orphanhood

The Girls of Nazareth House Remember

Delyth Edwards

palgrave macmillan memory studies



# Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies

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*For all care experienced children, young people and adults...  
Mary Agnes and Rachel, this is for you...*

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## Introduction: Starting from a Place of Familial Memory

It would be fair to suggest that most of us have photographs of our younger selves from which we draw memories that we may use to tell stories about ourselves and others. My Mother is different. She does not have much to offer in terms of mnemonic visual resources (Pickering and Keightley 2015) about her past self, except one photograph. My mum was born in a town in county Antrim, Northern Ireland in 1943. Subsequently her mother passed away a few weeks after her birth, leaving my grandfather to care for my mother and her four siblings. Unable to cope and provide adequate care for the children, he decided it would be best to place my mother and her sisters in Nazareth House, a Catholic and girls only children's home in Belfast run by *the Poor Sisters of Nazareth*. She became a "girl" of Nazareth House, an orphan. My mother's brother was placed separately in Nazareth Lodge; a Home for boys run by the same religious order. My mum remained in this Home during her entire childhood and until adolescence, leaving in the late 1950s (Fig. 1.1).

Despite her lack of *material* memory objects, throughout my childhood and beyond mum has continuously told stories of her upbringing in what she always refers to as the "Home" and of her life once she left the confinements of residential being. She passed on memories in the form of stories about her self and place. I found such recollections intriguing as a child, largely because I was unable to associate it with my own childhood. I could not understand how mum came to be



**Fig. 1.1** Photograph of authors mother (date unknown). Authors family album

the woman she is today and provide such a loving home for my brother and myself when her own childhood home was—in the Goffman (1991) sense—a ‘total institution’. How was she able to successfully realise and perform the identity of ‘mother’ when she had never known hers? What other identities had been available to her during her life course? From a familial, and later a sociological academic perspective, I have questioned how her childhood in care or her orphanhood impacted upon her ‘self’ being and her biography. These musings augmented over time and I began to think about other women who grew up in this House. It is their life (hi)stories that outline the core of this book.

I used the (auto)biographical interview to collect and analyse the life (hi)stories of twelve undervalued ‘historical witnesses’ (Roberts 2002) of orphanhood for my doctoral research. These were women who had grown up in the same children’s home as my mother throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Some remembered my mum from the Home, incorporating her into their stories, others did not. By asking for their life stories, I sought to explore how they interpret and re-tell their biographies and the ways they (re)construct experience and ontology (or ontologies) of the self (Hankiss 1981). Listening to and positioning the memories of former residents of the Home is the central focus of this book as memories are the ‘living active engagement between past and present’ (Green 1998, p. 449) and are of the greatest ‘significance to the self system’ (Nelson 1993, cited in Yow 2005, p. 36). However, remembering Orphanhood is a complex process, which involves and invokes not only autobiographical but also cultural and absent memories. This is the main argument of this book. Orphanhood is both a personal subject of *lived* experience and an object of social interest and speculation. The orphan remains a prominent character in our social memory as narratives because it is not simply an experience belonging in the past. Remnants of this identity continue to exist for children and young people growing up in the care system today, as this book will demonstrate.

Nazareth House, as in the building in Belfast which was the childhood Home for so many like my mother, no longer exists. What remains are the traces of memories which will be shared within this book, that exist alongside and at times contradict the official history of how children were looked after once upon a time in Northern Ireland. By asking the *Girls of Nazareth House* to remember, this book offers an empirically and experientially informed understanding of how memories of Orphanhood interact and interconnect or come into being in the re-telling of a life story and construction of an identity. It is a book about how care experienced identities are embedded within personal, social and cultural practices of remembering. The book touches upon several themes; histories of care in Northern Ireland, narratives and memories, reflexivity’s of home, and self and identity. The aim is to introduce readers to the complexity of memory for care experienced people and what this means for their life story and identity.

The first step in this introduction is to remember Nazareth House because this is the origin of memories. Although concerned with the subject of the (auto)biography, the House, a building plays a crucial

function in this story and in the memories of the books participants and for this reason, I will discuss briefly the background of the institution, its origins, its space and what it meant, spatially and socially for the children being housed there. Everything documented in this book originates from Nazareth House. For this reason, Nazareth House is remembered in three ways in this introductory chapter. Firstly, it is remembered as an institution emplaced within a wider system and set of practices occurring at a particular moment in history. Secondly, it is remembered as a building which existed physically in time and space. Thirdly, staying true to my sociological self, social theory is applied to the memory process. Social theory can help us to interrogate, question, critique and to be experimental with memories. But for now, it is time to move on from that place of familial memory to a story, which, in part constructed those memories that inspired this book and the state of Orphanhood for so many.

#### RELIGION: A CULTURE OF CARE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This section considers the first way of remembering Nazareth House; from the wider systems and set of practices within which it and other institutions just like it would have been embedded. It takes into consideration the official policy and legislation of the care of orphaned children during that time; memories a divided Ireland and the utopian narrative of being cared for by a religious group.

The earliest knowledge of the care system documented in the UK derives from official sources, such as policy and legislative frameworks. The 1940s through to the 1960s is a particularly interesting period to remember because it is a time which saw significant legislative transformation with regards to the welfare and care of children. It would be difficult for many of us to imagine a time when the welfare state did not exist, however, when my mum was born, this exactly was the case. In 1945, two years after my Mother's birth, the labour party newly voted into government promised to tackle poverty; and so between 1945 and 1951 the Labour Prime Minister at that time, Clement Atlee and the Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, made significant changes to welfare in Britain and Northern Ireland. This affected many areas of everyday life and impacted greatly on children, particularly children growing up in the care of the local authority. The first investigation officials conducted into the care system in the UK was carried out in 1946 by the Curtis

Committee. This inquiry was a response to the death of Denis O’Neil, who had been murdered in 1944 by his foster parents. This investigation resulted in a published report which was ‘the first enquiry in this country directed specifically to the care of children deprived of a normal home life, and covering all groups of such children’ (The Report of the Care of Children Committee 1946, paragraph 3, p. 5).<sup>1</sup> The report was extremely critical of public authorities’ care for children, revealing many weaknesses in administration, liaison and supervision. Following this, 1948 saw the establishment of a new Children’s Act where a children’s committee and a children’s officer were founded in each local authority, including that of Northern Ireland.

The boundaries and linkages of policy and legislative frameworks concerned with the care of children in Northern Ireland have crossed over the years between Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Before the 1921 treaty, Ireland as a whole was under the jurisdiction of British governance. After the partition, policy and legislative frameworks in the North had remnants of both its past (an Irish) and British influence (Skehill 2003, 2008). Setting the partition of Ireland aside, what is significant in the official history of the care system during this time was that prior to the Children and Young Persons Act of 1948, ‘residential care in Northern Ireland was largely provided by the voluntary sector’ (A Better Future: 50 Years of Child Care in Northern Ireland 1950–2000, pp. 92–93). Religious organisations played a major role in the care and upbringing of many vulnerable children in Ireland (North and Republic). Smith (2007, p. 28) explains that after 1840, in Ireland ‘Catholic religious congregations, already engaged in a variety of related charitable works, including running schools and visiting the poor and sick, increasingly involved themselves in custodial care of various kinds’ and that Catholic religious congregations moved quickly to dominate the management of these institutions.

In line with this observation Caul and Herron (1992, p. 67) explain that ‘social work in Northern Ireland up to the Second World War existed in many forms and was not open to convenient definition. For instance the distinction between social work and religious movements was not always clear. Various religious groups, such as *The Poor Sisters of Nazareth*, had actively been contributing towards the personal welfare of individuals in keeping with their own assumptions and pastoral concern’.

Recommendations from the 1956 *Northern Ireland Child Welfare Council* report ‘highlight the strong religious stencil which has tended to

be stamped over discussions on social issues in Northern Ireland. It was suggested that it was important to allocate children to homes in line with their religious backgrounds' (Caul and Herron 1992, p. 79). Moreover, requirements and recommendations listed in the 1950 Children Act for the welfare authorities included 'Promoting the religious upbringing of children' and '[l]imiting the period in which children may be accommodated in homes' (*A Better Future: 50 Years of Child Care in Northern Ireland 1950–2000*). During this time, religious upbringing of children was still of great importance and that the act of 'institutionalising' children was to be avoided. This practice was enforced upon those in working in welfare authorities also:

We iterate the principle that a child should be brought up in the religious faith of his parents, and since the voluntary organisations in this field are closely linked with the churches the easiest solution would be for the Welfare Authority to ask the appropriate organisation to accept responsibility for those children who will have to stay for long periods in care and who are not suitable for adoption or boarding out.

Children in Care: A Report by the Northern Ireland Child Welfare Council. (1956, p. 14)

The time before power irrefutably shifted towards the welfare authorities, children in voluntary homes run by a religious organisation were more likely to have been placed in there by the request of a clergyman. The reason for this 'is explained partly by their concern that the child's religious upbringing might not be so well secured in the care of a welfare authority as in a voluntary home which is run by a religious community or by an organisation with a religious connection' (*Children in Care: A Report by the Northern Ireland Child Welfare Council 1956*, p. 20). In other words, the 'socio-spiritual' discourse of anti-proselytisation (Raftery and O'Sullivan 1999; Skehill 2003). Discourse is not only concerned with communicating meaning, but also constituting and constructing meaning itself. Discourse has been taken to mean on one level 'a regular set of linguistic facts, while on another level it is an ordered set of polemical and strategic facts' (Foucault 2002, pp. 2–3). Religion and morality, as a discourse in this sense, was especially important for the care of children in the Irish context, which needs particular consideration within a study on memory. As this book will demonstrate, this discourse has been imprinted as a lasting 'vital memory' (Brown and Reavey 2015) of a difficult national heritage on our social conscious.



*Discourse and Memory of the North/South Irish Context*

The circumstance of Ireland is an exceptional example when considering the discourse surrounding the containment of children, yet fickle when considering the North/South divide as already demonstrated. Carr (2010, p. 14) writes that ‘the more remarkable features of the Irish context is the manner in which institutions, largely operated by orders of the Catholic Church proliferated’. In the period following 1937, the ‘newly independent Republic of Ireland, free of British intervention, sought to define Irishness and the national moral character’ (Crowley and Kitchin 2008, p. 355). Being in a state of great uncertainty, alternative ways of ordering identity was needed. Crowley and Kitchin (2008, p. 360) write that the ‘1937 Constitution cemented the family as the key social unit in society, marriage as the key social act, and explicitly stated that a woman’s place in society was as home-maker’. The family was the cornerstone of social order in the Republic. Those who posed a threat to the ‘Catholic Christian moral economy’ (Ferguson 2007) needed to be contained in the care of the church in specialised spaces. Those contained were not only adult men and women but also children. In the 18th and 19th centuries adults and children were detained in spaces together, but ‘separate institutional provision’ was formed for children and young people in the mid 19th century because it was perceived that ‘children and young people may be more amenable to change and reform and therefore require separate forms of intervention’ (Carr 2010, pp. 21, 65).

Reasons for children being taken into such places included poverty or what the church defined as unsuitable lifestyles. An example of Giddens’ (1991) ‘sequestration of experience’, which occurs so that the ‘ontological security’ of the everyday could be protected. Some parents were ‘not only viewed as immoral or culpable but as incapable of parenting and an active source of corruption of children’ (Peters 2000, p. 8). The unmarried mother, in particular, was a ‘defining figure’ of the time (Kennedy 2001). Illegitimate births were regarded as ‘gross moral infractions’ for instance and numerous pregnant women chose or were forced into travelling to the former occupier, Britain, to have their babies because it was seen to be ‘less puritanical and a more anonymous environment’ (Crowley and Kitchin 2008, pp. 359, 368). The sanctity and supremacy of marriage was such that it was a ‘sin’ and ‘social offence’ within Catholic teaching to have a child out of wedlock. Sex was preserved for procreation and had no place outside of marriage (Flannery 2009). Carr (2010, p. 38) writes that

illegitimate ‘children were one of the main constituents of the institutional population’ in the Republic. It was common for children who came from corrupt situations such as this, to be placed within the ‘moral institution’ of the church (Crowley and Kitchin 2008, p. 359) where they could be inscribed with ‘morality, duty and a sense of place’ not available in the home of origin (Peters 2000, p. 9).

At a time when care policy was beginning to recognise the importance of familial relationships and attachment, Ireland was still practising the incarceration of children considered to be in ‘moral danger’ within their parental home (Ferguson (2007)). A ‘sanitised moral landscape’ was sought through the emplacement of the polluted into ‘places of formation’ (Crowley and Kitchin 2008, p. 355). It was rationalised that these children, if left unprotected and untreated would threaten the social order of society. They were scrutinised and categorised in terms of what they could become, rather than what they were at the present time (Ferguson 2007). This resonates with Foucault’s (2002, p. 57) ‘dangerousness’, the assumption that ‘the individual must be considered by society at the level of his potentialities, and not at the level of his actions; not at the level of the actual violations of an actual law, but at the level of the behavioural potentialities they represented’.

Fundamentally, the church was the author and producer of orphanhood, a discourse that resonates greatly with Victorian child welfare. Orphans or the condition of orphanhood was purposely produced in order to create ‘useful citizens’ (Peters 2000, p. 14). The orphan was perceived during this epoch as a scapegoat, ‘as one who embodied the loss of the family, [who] came to represent a dangerous threat’ (Peters 2000, p. 2). As a result the ‘intervening philanthropist played the role of hero’ and the ‘narrative of child rescue’ emerged (Murdoch 2006, pp. 17, 35), a biopolitic narrative that was to continue into the 20th century (Foucault 2002). The municipal technique here, to govern a certain immoral population, by embodying them in created spaces.

Despite being seen as the ‘less puritanical’ other, it must be remembered that remnants of the south existed in the north, especially within the catholic institutions and a similar social ‘landscape’ was spatially sculpted. This narrative of child rescue and these places of containment, regardless of geographical location, north and south, worked together to hide, reform and discipline the threatening population. The majority of the children’s ‘homes run by the religious orders [had] direct links with

other homes run by the order either in Northern Ireland or other parts of the British Isles and elsewhere' (Operation of Social Services in relation to Child Welfare 1966, paragraph 11, p. 8). Despite being governed by a different political jurisdiction, with regards to the religious care of children, there were no boundaries on the Island. Institutions run by the Catholic Church were part of a 'carceral topography' (Carr 2010, p. 16). The Sisters of Nazareth, for example had convents in Belfast, Derry, Termonbacca, Mallow, Sligo, Fahan and Portadown. So it was likely that children would have been moved between these homes, farther away from the family of origin, their influential depravity and from their earliest childhood memories.<sup>2</sup>

### *A Utopian Narrative?*

'The Poor Sisters of Nazareth' (est. 1855) gained papal approbation in 1899 to provide 'tender care of the little ones and secondly for the aged in need of the security of a good home' (The Sisters of Nazareth pamphlet 1977, p. 8). The congregation quickly set up children's homes and residential homes for the elderly across the UK and Ireland, with the Mother House being located at Hammersmith in London, where it remains today. A significant figure in the Order was Sister St. Basil who was to become the first Mother General to the congregation (in 1855). The publicity material Nazareth House disseminated as a (re)presentation of itself in later years is illustrative of this Christian approach to caring for the orphan. They claim to practice the care of children, which mirrors that of the first Holy Family of Nazareth (Fig. 1.2):

"See the Divine infant in the little ones, try to love them very much for His sake" [...] In these words Mother St Basil bequeathed to her children the rule and spirit of one of the most beautiful vacations in God's Church – that of a Sister of Nazareth. Modelled as it is on the Holy Family of Nazareth every Nazareth House is a home in the fullest sense of the word. (Text taken from the front cover of a Sisters of Nazareth pamphlet 1977, p. 1)

A noticeable utopian narrative is present in this material, both pictorially and within the written message from Mother St Basil. Foucault once said in a lecture that 'Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down but in any case these utopias are fundamentally



Fig. 1.2 Publicity pamphlet produced by the poor sisters of Nazareth (1977)

unreal spaces' ([1967]/1986, p. 24). This book seeks to explore, through memory, what is real and unreal about Nazareth House.

### THE ARCHIVED HISTORY OF SPACE

This section moves on to consider the second way of remembering Nazareth House, the building, its physical existence. Here I outline the materials of the building which continues to exist and which can act as reminders of a past place and system of care. The term 'orphanage' is something of a memory within the UK today because it is no longer a term used to describe places where children are 'looked after'. Large

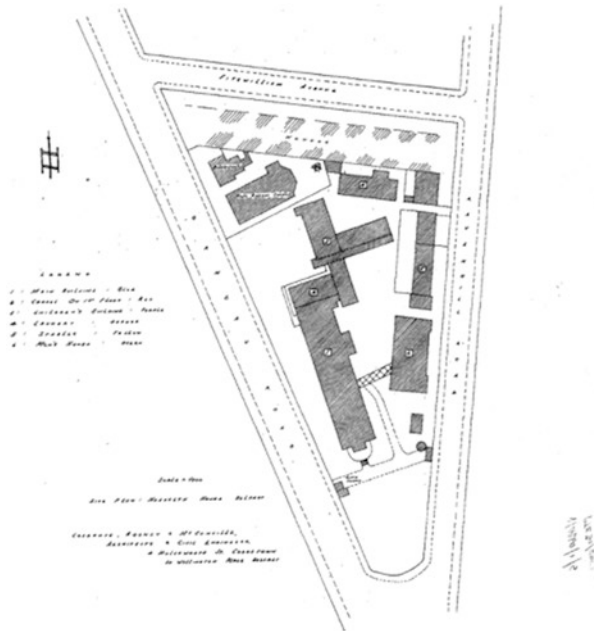
institutions of this kind are places which exist only in memory. There has been criticism poised towards incorrect use of the term orphanage to describe institutions that housed children who were not orphans in the ‘true’ or ‘legitimate’ sense (Smith 1995; McKenzie 1996a, b; Raftery and O’Sullivan 1999; Kennedy 2001). Nazareth House would have sheltered children whose mother and father had passed away and children whose parents were both still alive, as well as those who were illegitimate. I perceive it to be a place where orphanhood was produced and cultivated.

“The Home” “The House” “The Convent” “The Orphanage” “Nazareth and Nazzie” are the many and diverse terms used by my participants when talking about Nazareth House (and perhaps diverse experiences). These are their definitional terms, some official and some endearing. As the method is based on memory work I am aware that I am only gaining insight to a *past* place and space. A place that no longer exists and will never exist again. Nazareth House has become a *forgotten* place, a temporal place, a historical place. It is a space and place that can only be constructed through memory because there is little documentation of it. Throughout this book I will refer to Nazareth House either by its name or by the idiom of ‘the Home’ or House.

It was a struggle to find information about this particular House. A visit to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) however proved useful and I obtained copies of the architect’s plans for the building from 1934. Nazareth House was situated on the corner of the Ormeau/Ravenhill road in the south of Belfast city (it can also be seen from Fig. 1.3 that Nazareth House was a Home for the elderly who were housed in a different space).

However, I have been unable to obtain other official memories about the building, such as when was it built and whether or not it was utilised for different purposes prior to being a Home for children. What other memories does this building hold for people in Belfast? All there is in terms of material memories are the illustrations contained within these archives, which extensively memorise the exteriors of the building (Figs. 1.4 and 1.5).

When my mum saw these images for the first time, it took some time for her to recognise them as the place where she spent her childhood. But with further looking and conversation, she began to remember and shared stories. She concluded that the photograph taken of her with her sisters was taken on the steps we can see in these images.



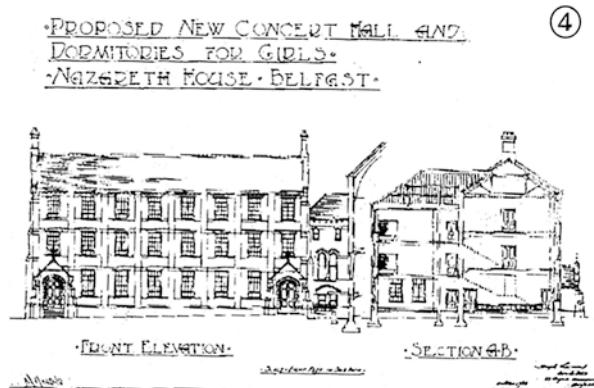
**Fig. 1.3** Architects plan of Nazareth House (1934). Used with permission from the Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) (PRONI ref: D4260/1/5)

Figure 1.6 is a photograph taken of the House and is the only photographic image I have been able to locate. These types of buildings are slowly disappearing from our national material artifacts of memory. Yet it is important for us to visually understand the enormity of this Victorian–esque building so that one can judge for themselves whether it appears ‘Homely’ and also for me as a researcher and also a *daughter* to be able to envisage a setting that I will never be able to experience myself; only then will we be able to ‘imagine the epoch to which’ the *Girls of Nazareth House* belonged (Romanov 2008, p. 2). I visited the site during my time in Belfast (on my own and with my mother) and the only structure that remains original is the surrounding wall. This wall is a trace or a revealed memory of a previous time.

Upon visiting institutions such as Nazareth House, the Curtis Committee of 1946 perceived these striking buildings, prevalent during



**Fig. 1.4** Architects plan of rear and end elevations of concert hall (1934). Used with permission from the Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI ref: D4260/1/2)



**Fig. 1.5** Architects plan of front elevation and section of Concert Hall (1934). Used with permission from the Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI ref: D4260/1/4)

the time as homes for children, as visual monstrosities and deemed them unbecoming for the care of children because of their ‘barrack appearance’. One member of the committee comments on one children’s home they inspected: