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## **AFTER BESSBOROUGH AND TUAM, WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM ROSCREA?**

*By Anne Wall*

The acclaimed film, “Philomena” tells the story of one survivor of the mother and baby home situated at Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea, Co Tipperary. It was based on the book “The Lost Child of Philomena Lee” by Martin Sixsmith. It traces the search for Philomena’s son, Anthony. Philomena gave birth to Anthony in 1952 in Sean Ross Abbey, he was given up for adoption without her permission.

The film shows how the nuns in the Abbey not only manipulated Philomena during her time in their care, but also years later as she searched for her son, and he searched for her. Her story is heartbreaking just like so many more stories of the women that went through Sean Ross Abbey and the other mother and baby homes.

Sean Ross Abbey is located near Roscrea in Co. Tipperary, it operated as a mother and baby home from 1932 until 1970. During that time, thousands of unmarried women passed through its doors with an estimated 6,079 babies being born there. As with other mother and baby homes of this time, the women were treated badly, working long hours in the laundry or on the farm with little food or comfort.

When it came time to give birth, no pain relief was offered, the women being told to suffer the pain of childbirth to atone for their sins. Many babies were taken from their mothers and adopted, many sent to the United States, often without the mothers signing any papers. A similar practice was practiced in other Mother and Baby homes of the time. Sean Ross Abbey closed its doors as a mother and baby home in late 1969 and since then has operated as a home for those with intellectual disabilities aged from four to eighteen years.

Sean Ross Abbey had a very high mortality rate, higher than many other Mother and Baby homes of the time. During the decades that it operated as a Mother and Baby home over 1,000 babies and infants under 3 are thought to have died there. In July 2020 journalist, Alison O’Reilly, -who broke the Tuam babies’ scandal- uncovered names of 1,024 children who died in Sean Ross Abbey.

Causes of death include severe malnutrition, convulsions, exhaustion and sun stroke. Four years ago, a portion of the “Angel Plot” within Sean Ross Abbey was examined, but the remains of just 42 infants were found. Survivors of the home are not happy with this finding and want more examination of the area around the home. Local knowledge seems to indicate that many more babies and infants are buried in or around the Abbey.

After much campaigning by a group of survivors of the home, officials at the Department of Children have agreed to fund a geophysical survey, on a patch of land located near the "Angel Plot." A spokesperson for the group explained that the hope is that the scan will help discover what happened to all the children and give them the recognition in death that they were denied in life.

Whatever the outcome of this geophysical survey, however many remains of innocent babies and infants are found, who will be held responsible, who will take accountability? And will this be the last Mother and Baby home to face exposure of cruelty towards unmarried mothers and their children?

The Roman Catholic Church colluded with the Irish State throughout the decades, hiding women away, taking their children, making them voiceless. They treated them as though they were insignificant and powerless against these institutions.

The Church still has a big stake in our education and health systems, we need to separate church and state. We need a state-run education system together with a state-run health service, a health service that will put people's health care first without intervention from the church.

**The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.**

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