Twitter Thread by Greg Daly



Greg Daly
@GregDalyIC

In talking about 20th-Century Irish history, we should probably avoid sharp distinctions between Church, State, and Society, as though these were discrete entities, rather than things so organically interwoven that they were more or less expressions of the one thing.

> The Mother and Baby Homes report looks right to say Irish society at large was to blame, and it\u2019s clear from the summary that Ireland\u2019s civic and political institutions, which demanded the homes, were fully clued in on how harsh and even lethal the homes were. But... 1/3
>
> — Greg Daly (@GregDalyIC) January 13, 2021

The Republican movement piggybacked on the Church to win mass support for independence, say, while both Cosgrave and de Valera deliberately courted Catholic votes; in the privacy of their polling booths, Irish voters, overwhelmingly voted for socially conservative parties. /2

The Oireachtas and county councils etc were elected and staffed by ordinary Irish people, not people who landed from outer space or England or Rome, with ordinary Irish families and neighbours, and it was these who mandated, owned, funded, supervised, and supplied the homes. /3

As for clergy and religious, the country was full of seminaries and religious houses of formation; Ireland was basically a factory for priests, brothers, and nuns, all of whom were members of ordinary Irish families, and formed by the Irish values of the time. /4

Given how many homes had clergy and religious in the family, could anyone really hold that these were somehow separate? Yes, maybe your aunt was a 'good nun', or your uncle was a 'nice priest', but either way the point stands that they were ordinary Irish people. /5

And this applied at all levels of society: if you were a big farmer, well, maybe you'd have the luck of being the bishops' brother and being able to influence each other; if you were a poor girl from Donegal, maybe you'd be a sister and treated like a skivvy by other sisters. /6

Was Catholicism responsible for cruelty? Well, Catholics sure were, and I'd be wary of playing a 'no true Scotsman' card here, but Catholicism as such? It's hard to find Church teachings that could ever have excused the cruelty that was rife, so

maybe we need to think harder. /7

After all, how can you get from 'blessed are the poor' to poverty being a source of moral shame, a marker of disgrace? That's not Catholic, by any definition. Some will speak of Irish Catholicism as being Jansenist, but while that's historical tosh it makes an important point. /8

There's something to be said for recognising that Irish Catholicism was distinctive - not that it wasn't Catholic, but that it was a distinctive version of Catholicism with its own good points and its own very bad points. /9

It's been said that late 19th- and 20th Century Ireland had 'a Protestant culture decked out in second-hand Catholic clothes', and there's something to that: certainly, a rigorous Victorian morality pervaded Irish society after Emancipation and especially after the Famine. /10

A lot of this was about hiding our shame, our shame at our own poverty, our shame at how we'd survived the Famine, or shame at what it had taken to get through the Famine, our shame even at how we'd done so when others hadn't, and this shame manifested in a scorn for poverty. /11

(There's a related story to be told about attitudes to the Irish language, of course, and to the Travellers as well for that matter.) /12

This tied too with how the decades leading to independence also saw us embracing a romantic view of our past, a time of noble Celtic warriors (never slaves, of course), and a land of saints and scholars, and the belief that we had taught Europe once, and could again. /13

You'll see this nodded to in the 1916 Proclamation, say, and in the writings of the likes of Eoin MacNeill. Ireland had been glorious once, and could be again, and the world would gain from it. But what about those who could be seen to be letting the side down? /14

Cartoons in 19th-Century newspaper regularly showed the Irish as savages and brutes, little different from apes. Opponents of Home Rule saw the Irish - like others elsewhere in the British Empire - as nowhere near ready to govern themselves. /15

Little wonder, then, that Synge enraged people when he wrote Playboy of the Western World and showed Irish peasants as cunning, violent sorts. Yeats's poems could point to the cynicism and cheapness of those in the cities, but these were the pure Irish! /16

As a newly independent country we had a face to present to the world, a shiny, modern, respectable, responsible face, and if people were going to undermine that - and this was a time of moral panics everywhere - well, they needed hiding away. /17

Men, of course, could get away with it, could feign innocence, could lie or disappear or simply shrug things off, but women couldn't hide their pregnancies, and so bore the scorn of a society that saw respectability and pride as supreme goods - and not as deadly sins. /18

Did men repent for this in the Confessional boxes? Who knows? If they did seek absolution, they clearly didn't actually try to rectify any harm they'd done. But with nobody knowing who fathers were, mothers paid the price, and what a price. /19

There don't seem to have been many alternatives other than Mother and Baby homes if families were to turn on their own, and though the State wanted them and the local authorities owned and supervised them, it's clear that they and those in them were basically let rot. /20

Yes, such homes existed elsewhere - one real strength of the new report is that it makes real efforts to provide historical context - but Ireland's were atypically large, and often in shoddy, even dilapidated buildings. /21

In our Covid times were should have a sense of what this would have meant for infections, with people crammed closer together in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s than they were even in the tenements of inner-city Dublin, and dying at a higher rate too. /22

Making it worse, it seems clear that they were poorly supplied with shoddy food and milk etc too, as the kind of Irish people who'd add the halfpence to the pence and prayer to shivering prayer would seek to make a profit from their misery by leaving the worst for the worst. /23

Hence the deaths from malnutrition, no doubt, or most of them. This sort of stuff doesn't change, of course - look at our Direct Provision system now, or the scandal over English school lunches, where it's hard to believe suppliers aren't pocketing most of what they're paid. /24

Most of those involved with the homes were Catholic: the girls who went in, the families who sent them there, the neighbours who whispered, the nuns who ran the places, the businessmen and farmers who supplied them, the people in the authorities who owned and oversaw them. /25

As such, regardless of how Church teaching was ignored, it's impossible to claim in an honest and informed way that the Church wasn't responsible, just as it's impossible to similarly claim that the State wasn't, or that Society at large wasn't. /26

As I said at the start, these were all in practice the same thing, the same Irish people who prayed and voted and gossiped and drank and fought and worked and traded and loved and cheated and gave charitably and paid taxes... /27

Anyway, I've gotten carried away again. A standalone tweet took on its own momentum, I'm afraid. One thing remains clear, anyway: women and children were treated dreadfully in these places, and we should do all we can to stop this - or similar things - happening again. 28/28