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## **PRESS WATCH - Let's take the easy option and burn a few Bon Secours nuns**

**And now it's the turn of the Bon Secours sisters to endure an hour of national hate. Good luck, girls — and just pray the mob soon moves on elsewhere. Your deeds will probably soon slip down the register of unbearable infamy, while the national psyche seeks new targets for our traditional sport: hunting-pack hysteria, Kevin Myers in the Sunday Times**

Whatever happened in Tuam didn't occur in isolation. Irish society as a whole conspired to stigmatise unmarried mothers. And not just Ireland. In America in 1922, on orders from Washington and simply because she was unmarried, an English single immigrant mother and her son at Ellis Island were granted permission to enter only after she had posted a

\$1,000 bond, presumably lest she corrupt American manhood.

In 1924, soon after Irish independence, Co Galway's library committee submitted a large number of books to the archbishop of Tuam for his approval. He duly condemned to mass incineration any published works he even suspected of being anti-Christian, or about sex, or engaged in — yes, here it is — “the glorification of unmarried mothers”.

The offending books were duly burnt in a sanctimonious bonfire over Christmas 1924, a deed justified by the Galway library committee. “Whatever was done was honestly and conscientiously done in the moral interests of the people,” it stated, “and we fear no publicity or criticism and have no apology to make.”

Contrary to some reports, George Bernard Shaw's books were not burnt. Instead they were made inaccessible, to be read only with the special authorisation of the book-burners of the library committee. Shaw got off lightly. The committee secretary observed sagely: “No one would hold that authors such as Tolstoy are suitable for circulation.”

Professor John Howley of University College Galway agreed: “What was to be done with these books? Was there any great sin in incinerating them?” Five years later, Howley was elected president of the Library Association of Ireland. Its vice-president was Professor Eoin MacNeill of UCD, formerly head of the Irish Volunteers, thus effectively putting an official imprimatur on the strategy of censorship by fire.

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In 1928, Senator Thomas Toal told Monaghan county council of a serious outcry over “the problem” of unmarried mothers. “They should not make a palace of the county home [which] provided for them after they misconducted themselves,” he said. “They get treatment and nourishment for themselves and their children . . . then they go out about the country and then come back in again. A great many were ‘hardy annuals’ who [are] bringing disgrace on the county.”

Four years later, Monaghan council heard that attempts to bring prosecutions against unmarried

mothers had proved — as its chairman JF Smyth elegantly put it — “abortive”.

When in 1938 a Catholic priest — yes, one of the nowadays hated representatives of Rome — called Fr Donohoe strongly condemned Carlow county council’s policy of compulsorily incarcerating single mothers and their children in the county home, the council chairman James Hughes TD replied: “Why should we give them the right to refuse? They are living on the charity of people.”

The Bon Secours sisters set up their home in Tuam not long after the archbishop’s book-burning capers there. Is the atmosphere any less fevered today, when newspaper headlines shriek about “Ireland’s Holocaust” — a grotesque terminological requisitioning of the most abominable crime in Europe’s history? A solicitor, Kevin Higgins, told the High Court that a senior Bon Secours nun “was lying through her teeth . . . as is the norm for the Bon Secours sisters”. The norm? An officer of the court actually said that?

So let’s get a few things straight. The bodies of 796 brutally slain children were NOT secretly

buried in the Tuam site. That's simply the number of children who died there — about 22 a year for 36 years. Tragic though these deaths are, there's no evidence any of them was murder.

What should we do now? Burning a few nuns might be a good start — no doubt our media Salemites will eagerly light the faggots gathered around a few elderly Bon Secours ankles. Also, perhaps we should extend the judge Yvonne Murphy's limited inquiry to all 180 institutions minding children from 1922, including the Protestant boys' orphanage in Clifden, which some gallant IRA arsonists destroyed in 1922. Yes, if the state extends the inquiry for another 50 years or so, and agrees to spend the combined equivalent of the costs of the beef, planning and payments-to-politicians tribunals, aided perhaps by a few frank seances, the Irish people might finally get, as we say these days, "closure".

On Tuesday, the taoiseach treated Dail Eireann to an am-dram display of scripted rage over the historic fate of single mothers. Yet last year Enda Kenny was hailing the men and women of 1916. He cannot pretend the Ireland of the 1920s was not made by that generation of pseudo-

republican papist zealots who, when their time came, faithfully handed over the institutions of the new state to the Catholic hierarchy. Which is why the Galway county library board outsourced censorship duties to the archbishop of Tuam and his box of matches, and why the Free State's Obscene Publications Act soon afterwards outlawed the public use of the words "abortion" and "menstruation".

Thus, The Irish Times mentioned the latter word in its report on the committee on evil literature in February 1927. This word did not appear again in the The Irish Times until 1946, in an agency article on the after-effects of the atom bombs on Japan. Perhaps the sub-editors didn't notice, or maybe adjudged the contextual incineration of 150,000 human beings to have drained it of any possible aphrodisiac effects.

The policies of Irish governments for decades were driven by the semi-hysteria of Catholic religiosity. Was this really so very different from appeasing the screaming breast-beating Tuam-zealots of today?

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First published in The Sunday Times on March 12, 2017

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