Over the last week, there has been international outrage over reports of mass deaths of babies at a former home for unwed mothers in western Ireland. The story is dreadful, it’s but also more complicated than many of these reports suggest. Here’s a rundown:

Is it true that the skeletons of nearly 800 babies and children have been discovered in a septic tank in Ireland?

No. Contrary to a great deal of reporting, including two stories published by The Washington Post, it doesn’t appear that there are 800 skeletons in a disused septic tank. Many of the early stories appear to have conflated two different sources of information. One comes from a local historian, Catherine Corless, who has discovered death certificates for nearly 800 babies and children at the home, which was run by the Bon Secours order of nuns from the 1920s to the 1960s. The other comes from two local men, who say that they found some kind of crypt beneath a concrete slab in the area containing a number of skeletons when they were playing as boys in the early 1970s. One of the men estimates that 20 skeletons were contained in the space. These two different sources have been conflated into the claim that a mass grave of babies and children was found in a septic tank. Corless, who appears to have been the crucial initial source of information, has since claimed: “I never said to anyone that 800 bodies were dumped in a septic tank. That did not come from me at any point. They are not my words.”

So it’s all a big misunderstanding?

Not so fast. No one is challenging Corless’s archival research, which appears to show that nearly 800 babies and children died at the home over a period of 40 years, without burial records. Locals believe that they are buried in an unofficial graveyard at the back of the building, where they have built a small grotto and placed flowers. One expert on health and mortality in Ireland believes that the death rates are much higher than they ought to have been and deserve further investigation. Contemporary debates in Ireland’s parliament reveal that children born out of wedlock in Ireland in the 1920s had a mortality rate five times higher than normal, in part because of semi-deliberate neglect. In some years in some institutions, the mortality rate for such children seems to have been above 50 percent.
Until relatively recently, the Republic of Ireland outsourced most of its education system and large parts of its social welfare system to institutions associated with the Catholic Church (the smaller Protestant Church of Ireland ran a separate set of institutions for its own congregation). Religious orders received money from the Irish state or from local taxes to run schools, orphanages, hospitals and other institutions. State supervision of these facilities was at best spotty, although state officials appear to have tried to correct especially outrageous situations. Funding was politically controversial. The payments per child and mother to the nuns running the Bon Secours institute were described in a debate recorded by the Connacht Tribune in 1927 as “something terrible,” with one local worthy enquiring of the matron, “Would you not think the sum of [26 pounds] a year is too much to be paying for an infant?” A combination of violent prejudice against unwed mothers and their children, inadequate supervision and pressure not to spend money are likely to have played a key role in high infant mortality rates. The extent to which such neglect might have shaded into something more deliberate and active is unclear.

Why wasn’t there public outcry at the time?

Not only were unmarried mothers and their children marginalized from society, but religious institutions were politically powerful. Occasionally, scandals emerged, as in the notorious Cavan Orphanage Fire in 1943, where over 30 young girls died in a fire without any effective effort to save them, reportedly because the nuns who ran the orphanage didn’t want male volunteers to see the girls in their nightclothes. However, these scandals were soon buried — the judicial inquiry into the fire improbably concluded that the nuns bore no responsibility. Brian O’Nolan — who under the pen name Flann O’Brien was one of the great Irish novelists of the 20th century — was the secretary to the inquiry. Afterward, he wrote a piece of doggerel, “In Cavan there was a great fire, Judge McCarthy was sent to inquire, It would be a shame, if the nuns were to blame, So it had to be caused by a wire,” the deliberate artlessness of which concealed the genuine anger he shared with many other writers and thinkers at the apparent impunity of religious organizations.

What happens now?

Almost certainly, some kind of public inquiry. The Catholic Church has called for one, stressing that it should be independent. The Irish government has indicated that it believes an inquiry is warranted, both to establish the basic facts and to establish,
as best as is possible, given the intervening five decades, how they came about. The Bon Secours order, which ran the home, has expressed a general regret for what happened without any acknowledgment of specifics. While there will probably be a police investigation of the Tuam site to establish whether there are skeletons, and if so, where and how many, it hasn’t started yet, although journalists have begun to survey the site in the absence of state action. However, on the basis of the evidence so far, this isn’t a scandal about skeletons dumped into a septic tank. It’s a scandal about the systematized neglect of children over a period of decades.

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