

My mother is dead, no one can tell me what happened

THE WALLS of the sitting room at the back of Peter Mulryan's home in Ballinasloe, Co Galway, are covered with family photographs. He has seven children, four girls and three boys, and those who are married have had their big day marked by large, beautifully-framed portraits that hang in a line over the sofa.

There is another wedding set for this summer. Their daughter is getting married in Kilkenny and afterwards there will be another photo for the collection, which includes a shot of Peter's own marriage to his wife Kathleen in 1975, back when he sported a seriously impressive set of side-burns.

So far there are eight grandchildren, one more 'is on the way', and there are photos of them all.

Pride of place on the mantelpiece is a personalised thank you card from the latest arrivals, gorgeous ten-month-old twins.

Peter proudly goes through them all, pointing out each of his children, telling me who they are, what they do for a living and where they live. One son is in Sydney, Australia.

'We've been over to them a couple of times,' he says. 'They're due a baby later this year.'

Another son works in IT in Dublin, while one daughter lives in Kilkenny, where she is a teacher. The others are all close by and the Mulryans see them regularly, often babysitting their grandchildren.

Family is clearly everything to Peter. 'In my wildest dreams I never thought I'd get married,' he says. 'You see, generally, people like us didn't...'

Peter Mulryan is one of the several thousand illegitimate children who spent their first years at the notorious St Mary's Mother and Baby home in Tuam, Co Galway, from when it was opened in 1925 to its closure in 1961.

His story, like all of those who lived there watched over by the Bon Secours order of nuns, is desperately sad and deeply unfair.

Yet although scarred by his horrific childhood — which was devoid of any love and offered very little care — he managed to resist being consumed by his past and instead built up a solid and happy home for himself and his family.

Despite a limited education, he rose through the ranks of the P&T (later Telecom Eireann and then Eircom) to become a quantity surveyor.

He threw himself into sports, which he only took up at the age of 45, becoming an All-Ireland champion handball player and a successful coach in hurling and football skills for school kids.

The details of his troubled past, however, were always at the back of his mind. He managed to track down his mother, Bridget Mulryan, to the Magdalene Laundry in Galway City in the mid-1970s and was finally reunited with her when he was 33. He continued to visit her there until her death over a decade later.

That might have been that. But then, almost three years ago, the Tuam babies scandal broke, when it was revealed that local historian Catherine Corless had unearthed records that showed 796 children, most of them infants, had died at the mother and baby home during its years of operation.

It was a distressingly high mortality rate. But then it was also revealed that Corless could not find records of where these children had been buried, leading to the widely-held suspicion that there was a mass, unmarked grave on the site of the former home, possibly in the same location as a septic tank.

A Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes is still ongoing. As is an excavation at the site of the children's burial



by **Jenny Friel**

ground/memorial garden at the former Tuam facility.

Shortly after these revelations in 2014, a meeting was held in Galway and former residents of the home were invited to attend. Peter knew he had to go. 'It was hard reading about it and seeing it on the news,' he says. 'But I wanted to know more about my background.'

'You'd hear stories and rumours about the way we were treated but I couldn't remember. I don't know if I've somehow blocked it from my memory. I've tried to go back to those early years but I can't.'

There were just nine or ten people at that first meeting and it was the first time Peter had ever met other people who had lived at the home. Also there was Catherine Corless.

'I gave her my details and she said she'd see if she could find out anything about me,' Peter explains. 'It was about six or seven months later that she rang me. She said: "Peter, I think you had a sister."'

'It was totally shocking, my mother had never mentioned it. And I've no notion of what happened to my

'I've tried to go back to those years but I can't'

mother, just that she went back to Tuam and had Marian there.'

Corless had found Marian Mulryan's birth cert but she had also found her death certificate. At nine months old, the little girl was recorded as having died after an hour and a half of 'convulsions'.

'Catherine was only able to tell me that she was born and that she died,' says Peter. 'But I needed to know more. We'd heard that an awful lot of children at the home were sold on to couples in America. Death certificates were falsified, so maybe she went there, maybe she's still alive.'

With the help of solicitor Kevin Higgins, last year Peter launched a bid to have records from the home that are currently being held by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, examined to see if there is any more information about his sister.

They were in the High Court earlier this week, their fourth court appearance, where lawyers for Tusla said that any information they know of concerning Peter's family has already been handed over to him.

But they also said Tusla has an 'enormous' amount of documents, including 'substantial' material from

Peter Mulryan was born in a Tuam home and three years ago discovered his mother had a daughter too, when a death certificate for the baby was found. Now he's looking for burial information — though still harbours hope she's one of the many sent to the US in a 'clandestine adoption' and may even still be alive



Research Facility - Death Record											
Columba Registration Number		2436158		Bia a Chláirín (g) Cúairt Death Registered in the District of		Tuam No. 1		Lárleathán in the County of		Co. Galway	
Lárleathán an Phríomh-Chláirín in the Superintendent Registrar's District of				Tuam							
Uimh.	Data agus Ionad Háis	Ainm agus Sliocht	Genús	Stáid	Áraí	Céim, Gairm nó Sli Dheatha	Cúis D'fhoirneadha an Bhráid nó Sli D'fóirneadha	Síniú, Cúlú agus Ionad Cúairt nó Phríomhceol	An Data a Chláir	Síniú an Chláir	Síniú an Chláir
No.	Date and Place of Birth	Name and Surname	Sex	Condition	Age	Rank, Profession or Occupation	Certificate Cause of Death and Duration of Illness	Signature, Qualification and Residence of Informant	When Registered	Signature of Registrar	Signature of Registrar
275	10.55 February 1925 St Mary's Home	Marian Bridget Mulryan Mrs. Curran	Female	Spina	10 months	Domestic	Disruption of pregnancy 1 1/2 hours Cerebral	Daughter of Catherine Mrs. Curran St Mary's Home	19.55	John J. Curran Registrar	John J. Curran Registrar

Investigation: Peter's sister Marian's death certificate. Left, Peter with a picture of his mother Bridget

the Bon Secours and that it does not 'forensically examine' the records.

Peter is desperate to know if Marian could possibly be one of an estimated 1,000 children 'who may have been the subject of clandestine adoptions'. His lawyer, in court documents, explained that a senior HSE social worker who examined some of the records in her own time, established there was a 'large archive' of photos and other documents 'relating to children sent for adoption to the USA'.

Higgins argued that given 'evidence of widespread child-trafficking' within the Tuam home, 'there can be no certainty as to the fate of Marian Bridget Mulryan'. The case is due before court again on February 27.

Peter Mulryan is 73 years old, but looks far younger. He is noticeably fit and trim. Indeed, up to last year he was still playing handball competitively and reached the All-Ireland doubles semi-finals.

Just three weeks later he was diagnosed with colon cancer. 'I felt fine but was passing a bit of blood so I

said I'd get it checked out,' he says. 'I've had 27 sessions of chemo and 27 of radiation.'

Next week I'm having a minor operation but the prognosis is good.'

A handsome man with a shock of neatly trimmed white hair, he looks well, if a little tired. He admits the last couple of years have 'not been easy'. But when you hear about Peter's early life — the one he led before meeting Kathleen and settling down to start his own family — it's clear he has faced truly awful adversity before and survived.

He remembers nothing of his time at St Mary's Mother and Baby home. He learned the circumstances of how he ended up there from his mother's family, whose home was on the banks of Lough Corrib in the townland of Adragool, Co Galway.

'They were poor farmers on very bad land that regularly flooded,' says Peter. 'There were three girls and two boys but I don't know where my mother came in the family. I think her mother had passed away.'

'The story I was told was that when she was about seven or eight months pregnant the local parish priest came to the house and said she would have to leave the parish. She was unmarried and that was a huge scandal

back then. No one ever told me who my father was.'

'The priest ordered her to go to Loughrea County Home, so her father carried her on his bike, on the crossbar, from the house up to Loughrea. It was at least 20 miles away and there was an awful hill. They left at midnight so they wouldn't be seen. She was about 33.'

'Some complications set in about a week before the birth so she was brought to the Regional Hospital in Galway and that's where I was born. I was there for six days and then we went to Tuam. My mother was there for a year working or, as I call it, slaving away. She left after a year and was sent to the Magdalene laundry in Galway City.'

Peter remained at the home for another three and a half years.

'I've no memories of it at all, even though I was four and half when I left,' he says. 'But some of the people I've met since, some of them do remember it. They say it was the same thing every day, going around filthy dirty, the boredom and fighting. The way the food was served, a loaf of bread thrown out on the grass and them told to go and get it.'

He was fostered out to an elderly woman and her unmarried son who

With nobody but the State I ended my baby sister



Rare day out:
Peter with
his mother
Bridget and
his daughter
Karen at
Strandhill

follow me or want to leave and I'd be responsible if anything happened to her.'

He cut his visits down to once a month. He's grateful that his own children got to meet her on some of the day trips they brought her on, to places like Strandhill in Sligo.

'If it was now, we would have definitely taken her out that very first day,' he says. 'But it was different times...'

The Mulryans went on to have seven children and Peter worked his way up through P&T, finally ending up as a quantity surveyor, a remarkable feat given his fractured childhood and disrupted education. Throughout those years he told only Kathleen about his background.

'It was a shocking stigma,' he says. 'So I never talked about it.'

But since learning that he had a sister, Peter feels he can no longer keep quiet. 'It was shocking to hear about Marian,' he says. 'I've no idea who the father was, it just goes down as unknown on the birth cert. And I've no notion of what happened to my mother, except that she went back to Tuam and had Marian there.'

'She never mentioned anything about having another baby to me before she died. Possibly she was too embarrassed. But she was in the laundry when she got pregnant.'

He admits talking about his mother's tragic life is very hard. But he is determined to press on and find out what he can about his sister.

'All they have been able to tell me is that she was born and she died,' he says. 'Her death cert says there was

'I want proof of where she's buried'

an hour and a half of convulsions, there's no mention of a doctor. It's known that there are boxes and boxes of information. They have to go through them and see if there's anything else about Marian.

'If a person is shot in the North and disappears, the State go to the ends of the earth to find that body. But not for us. I want proof of where she's buried.'

Peter also wants it conclusively ruled out that Marian wasn't illegally adopted out to America.

'She could still be alive,' he says. 'That's what keeps me going.'

It was suggested in the High Court this week that Peter or his lawyer go through the files themselves.

'We wouldn't know what we're looking for and we can't go through other people's files,' he says.

His battle to have Tusla examine the documents in their possession has taken its toll. His children have only learned in recent years about his upbringing.

'They were very shocked,' he says. 'They couldn't understand how it was allowed to happen.'

And there have been financial implications. Although Kevin Higgins is working on his behalf for free, Peter must cover the court costs. He won't say how much it has set him back but a planned trip to Sydney to visit his son and his family has had to be postponed.

But he won't give up. 'Where is Marian buried? That's all I'm asking for,' he says. 'I need to know where Marian lies. The death rate was so high in that place, it goes to show the neglect there was.'

'It's a miracle I got through.'

lived on a small farm about 20 miles away. 'She was in her mid-70s and her son was in his mid-50s,' says Peter. 'There was an older boy living there as well who they'd fostered.'

'He was about 12 years older than me and was treated better because the woman had been younger when he was a small boy.'

'I was more minding her than she minded me.'

It was a brutal existence, one he still finds hard to talk about. There were regular beatings from the woman's son and Peter was put to work in the fields straight away.

'The son had a very cruel nature,' Peter says quietly.

Yet when the elderly woman died, when Peter was 19, he remained living at the farm.

'I stayed on until I was 33,' he says. 'I was afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave, where would I go to?'

He did attempt to find his mother in 1963. 'Of course I'd wondered about her,' he says of trying to find out information about her. 'I went to the HSE in Galway when I

was 19 but they had nothing for me, absolutely nothing.'

In the meantime he met Kathleen.

'We met when she was out walking with a friend of hers,' smiles Peter. 'I was about 27, it was a long courtship. We got married when I was 33.'

It was while preparing for their wedding that he finally stumbled

'They weren't allowed to talk to each other'

across his mother's name for the first time. In order to get married in a church he needed proof he had been baptised. 'I discovered where I was baptised, so I went to the parish priest there to get the certificate,' he explains. 'He wanted to know why I

was looking for it so I told him I was getting married and I needed it.'

'He kept quizzing me but eventually he handed it out. Lo and behold it had her name and the parish she was from. Just to see what her name was, after all that time...'

'I went to the priest at her parish, he was hesitant as well about giving me any information but finally he told me where her house was. Her family were still there — my uncle and an aunt — and they were very nice to me. They knew who I was. They'd seen a photo in a newspaper of me in a play, when I was in my own parish, and they recognised me and saw my name.'

It would seem his mother's family, who had been living relatively close by all those years, had kept tabs on him from when he was a boy.

'I remember from when I was 11 or 12, seeing a man cycling down the road, he was tall. They told me that was my uncle, so they knew where I was. It's awful sad.'

They also told him where he could find his mother, at the Magdalene

Laundry in Galway City. 'I went to visit her the first chance I got,' he says. 'They put me into a little office and a nun talked to me for a while, told me what she was like, explained she was institutionalised.'

Bridget Mulryan was about 66 the first time Peter met her.

'She was small and stooped and she couldn't look at you straight,' he says. 'She knew who I was all right and she was glad to see me, but she was expressionless. You see they weren't allowed to talk to each other in there.'

'And when their children would visit them, the nuns would say: "Your nephew or niece is here." It was never your son or daughter.'

Peter did consider bringing his mother home with him to Ballinasloe, where he had bought a house with Kathleen. 'We were told no, that she was too institutionalised and to be around kids would be too much for her,' he says. 'They were nuns, I trusted them and I accepted it.'

'I went every two weeks or so to visit her but then I was told I was coming too often, I was told she'd