

Lost children of the Empire... and how uncovering their story has torn my family apart

By Eileen Fairweather



On a summer's day in 1947, four small children excitedly boarded a huge ship. The O'Rourkes lived at a children's home in Belfast, and the nuns who ran it said they were sending them to England on a two-week holiday.

Instead, the SS Asturias finally docked at Fremantle, Western Australia, where a new group of nuns stripped and deloused the children, and announced they would never go home: their parents had been killed. It was a cruel lie.

The family was then split up: the eldest Ellen, aged ten, was sent to an orphanage with her younger sisters - Hannah, six, and seven-year-old Lil. The baby of the family, five-year-old Michael, went to another orphanage, one run by the Christian Brothers.

I discovered the O'Rourkes' story a few years ago while trying to find out about my late mother's mysterious background.

Mary McCauley was an orphan and obsessively secretive about her childhood, but it seemed that Ellen, her sisters and brother might be the children or even grandchildren of my mother's long missing uncle, Hugh O'Rourke.

Last week, an event in the news reminded me that my mother's silence was wiser than I realised. Knowing all the horrors I now do, I look back and wonder if she was trying to protect me.



Innocent victims: Boys leaving Britain for Australia as part of the child migrant scheme

The Australian and British Prime Ministers agreed to apologise to the estimated 10,000 children forcibly shipped from UK orphanages to those in Australia between the Forties and early Seventies under the scandalous and totally discredited child migrant scheme. My mother was lucky to escape it. Her relatives, sadly, were not.

Only a third of the child migrants were actually orphans - the rest had been abandoned by their parents or effectively stolen from them. As was common at the time, some parents put their children into care during

hard times - a situation they hoped would be temporary. But when they returned for them, they were often told the children had died.

'All we found was a boy driven mad by a motherless, battered childhood'

To make matters worse, the young migrants' documents were frequently destroyed, so they did not even know their parents' names and had no way back into the lives from which they had been ripped.

The O'Rourke children began their desperate search for their identity in the Seventies. Like most former child migrants, they were given scant help. When I found out about them in 2000, I longed to help. But I discovered something so shocking that I felt both horrified and betrayed.

I had stumbled across their search via the Internet When my mother had become terminally ill several years before, I'd begged her to tell me who raised her. But she refused.

Mum had no family photos, mementos, heirlooms or stories. All I really knew was that her family was poor, and it had been split up after her mother died during childbirth. My mother's father had to work away and while she was young, he died in tragic circumstances.

The most she would hint at was that various cousins took turns at raising her in Scotland and in Ireland. But my mother had 'married well' - to an English policeman - and lost touch with her relatives when she moved to London.

Mum was warm and feisty and made me laugh by performing Scottish sword dances over crossed kitchen knives. Yet her silences maddened me, and I longed to heal the pain that clearly never left her. When she died, I was sad yet relieved that she was released from the turmoil.

S.S. "ASTURIAS", September 47			LIST OF CIVILIAN	
No.	Berth.	Name	Age	Sex
805	322	O'ORR Mstr Robert	10	M
806	225	O'BRIEN Mstr Christopher	8	M
807	163	O'CONNOR Mstr Myles	7	M
808	227	O'CONNOR Mstr. Terence	9	M
809	299	O'DONNELL Mrs Bettina Guillette	33	F
810	301	O'DONNELL Miss Arabella Denise	7	F
811	303	O'DONNELL Mstr. John Fabrick	6	M
812	214	O'DONOVAN Miss Maureen	7	F
813	250	O'FARRELL Mstr Charles	8	M
814	152	O'LOUGHLIN Miss Rosaleen	11	F
815	154	O'LOUGHLIN Miss Margaret	13	F
816	256	O'ROURKE Mstr Michael	6	M
817	116	O'ROURKE Miss Ellen	9	F
818	118	O'ROURKE Miss Leila	6	F
819	120	O'ROURKE Miss Hannah	7	F

Written off: The O'Rourke children on the SS Asturias's passenger list and, below, Lil's medical report

For all persons, sixteen years of age and over, and those under sixteen not accompanied by parents.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION, AUSTRALIA HOUSE,
LONDON, W.C.2.

MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

Declaration by Applicant.
NAME Lelia (Lil) O'Rourke
Full Name in Block Capitals
ADDRESS Margaret House Belfast.

I eventually became a journalist, specialising in exposing the suffering of children without strong families to protect them. My work was not a coincidence: I was still somehow trying to make peace with my mother's memory.

It was time, I realised, to discover my own roots. In the late Nineties, I finally plucked up the courage to break Mum's embargo on finding out about her family.

Her family originated from Arranmore, a tiny island in Co Donegal, north-west Ireland. I went there and was ecstatic to find my grandfather's childhood cottage.

It had a corrugated-iron roof and one room, and had fallen down, but I carried back two stones for my mantelpiece as proudly as if they were diamonds.

I soon found that my mother's story was the norm, not the exception. I wrote in my diary: 'This was a family which gave away its children, reared them on the hoof, shoved them where they could. So many were brought up by people other than their parents.'

Indeed, through poverty, ill-health or sheer bad luck, almost every branch of her family had given away children to cousins, the Church or State.

I discovered that few of the older generation thought this abnormal: sending children to distant relatives abroad or the nuns was, in pre-Second World War rural Ireland, the only way to ensure they did not starve.

I discovered Mum had been boarded out to at least eight different groups of cousins, and stumbled across numerous secrets, including illegitimate births and 'living in sin'. No wonder she had reinvented herself.

Many I contacted refused to help but I kept looking, contacting every branch of cousins, which was how I came across the O'Rourkes' internet message.

I had met some of Mum's O'Rourke cousins, Jimmy and Johnny, in Scotland when I was tiny. Their father, Hugh O'Rourke, had left them in care after his wife Ellen McCauley, my mother's aunt, died of tuberculosis in 1915.

Hugh joined the British Army during the First World War but supposedly 'drank Lysol' (a disinfectant) to obtain a medical discharge. He never rescued his children from care, and no one knew what became of him, or his son of the same name.

In setting out to find them, I came across a notice on a genealogy website by an Australian called Lil O'Rourke. Her father, she wrote, was Hugh O'Rourke, her mother Jane McGrory, and they had lived in Northern Ireland.

I contacted her and pointed out that our missing Hugh O'Rourkes could just be coincidence, but wondered whether Jane McGrory was Hugh's second wife.

Lil wrote back, adding that she had two sisters, Ellen and Hannah, a brother Michael, and possibly other missing siblings as well. All these names appeared in my own family, although I was struck by Lil's diffidence. Why did she seem to have so little information?

Soon Lil admitted why she was in Australia and in the dark about her parents. 'We were shipped out with about 300 children as CHILD MIGRANTS. We were the lost children of the Empire. We were sent out as "good British stock" to populate Australia (to keep the "yellow race" out).

'We left Nazareth House, Belfast, on August 15, 1947 (two days after my seventh birthday). We arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia, on September 22, 1947. Ellen, Hannah and I were sent to a place called St Joseph's Orphanage in Wembley, Western Australia.

'It was run by the Sisters of Mercy (What a joke! They certainly did not show us mercy!) Young Michael was taken away and put into Castledare and a few years later he went to Clontarf. Both places were boys' orphanages run by the Christian Brothers (I'LL SAY NO MORE!!!)

'I think I only saw Michael twice in nine years. We haven't seen or heard anything about our parents.'

Lil's search for clues about what became of them was stymied because their marriage certificate could not be found. This left the child migrants entirely rootless. I wanted to help.

The child migrant scheme was responsible for sending about 150,000 children to British colonies, starting with Canada in the late 19th Century, and later to South Africa.

The aim was to provide cheap labour, relieve the strain on the public purse in Britain and increase the colonies' white breeding stock.

I asked Lil to send me copies of every document she and her siblings had obtained from various authorities during the previous 30 years. The envelope she sent was pitifully thin, and its contents made me weep.

Her recently obtained baptism certificate of August 14, 1940, even showed she was named Lelia. 'That was the first I knew I had a different name!' she said.

All children were medically assessed before their journey as the Australian immigration department stated it only wanted fine physical specimens.

Lil had been born with a cleft palate and harelip but these had been operated on and, a doctor noted, 'adequately replaced'. He added: 'Mentally good and worth taking as . . . she will not become a charge on the state.'

A child migration consent form was signed by Hugh O'Rourke on January 10, 1947, some seven months before the children left. The only problem, Lil noted, was that her father could not write. So who did sign the form? That mystery remains.

A surviving ledger from the Belfast convent says the children were received into care on December 1, 1942, and 'dismissed' in 1947. An earlier ledger observed: 'Mother deserted.'



Torn from home: Ellen, Lil and Hannah O'Rourke in the front row at St Joseph's Orphanage, Western Australia

Finding out what became of their mother was what all the O'Rourkes most longed for - if only, wrote Lil, so 'I could find her grave and lay flowers there'.

She spoke a lot about Hannah but said little of Ellen - now dead - or Michael. She let it slip that her brother now lived in England, but she did not elaborate.

However, I had known what she meant when she had alluded to his traumatic upbringing with the Christian Brothers - they were notorious for sexual abuse.

Since Lil hadn't suggested I meet up with Michael, I assumed his life was in some kind of turmoil. But I could never have guessed that the reality would be unimaginably darker.

The Castledare and Clontarf orphanages to which Michael was sent are now infamous. Young boys were forced to undertake backbreaking work in the boiling heat. Many of the Brothers beat and raped their young charges.

Whatever the reason for Lil's reticence about Michael, I decided not to push it but concentrated my efforts on the rest of the family instead.

I trawled through birth, death and marriage records in Ireland, Scotland and even England, as it became clear that Lil's Hugh O'Rourkes, like my mother's, were 'travellers'.

I came across 25 Jane McGrorys born within the right timescale, and more than 100 Hugh O'Rourkes, but still no marriage record. I contacted churches, government, social services and army archives and local historians, and eventually found workhouse records for the family.

Lil and Hannah were admitted to the Ballycastle Workhouse in Co Antrim at various dates in 1941 and 1942, sometimes alone, sometimes together. Their parents were described as living at Drumnagee, Bushmills, Co Antrim, or of 'no fixed abode'.

Their mother was heavily pregnant during their 1941 admission with Michael. She later bore another son - who was not sent to Australia - at 'Tin Row', Ballintoy.

A local farmer's wife told me Tin Row was little more than a tin-roofed cattle byre, let by the night for a pittance to homeless people. Elderly Protestant locals remembered the father as 'a bad rascal'.

A helpful Catholic Church secretary later found an old baptism record in which the priest had noted the family's roots were in Co Donegal. This helped me narrow down my list of Jane McGrorys to just three.

I contacted the brother born in the tin shed after the other children went into care. I'll call him Johnny.

He seemed a fine man. Despite his hard start in life, he had made a good marriage, done well in his career and told me an extraordinary story. It made me realise I was repeating work others had done before me - and led me to a terrible family secret.



Unhappy memories: Mary McCauley, far right, with her daughter Eileen and granddaughter Katarina, would never talk about her past

Johnny was raised by a foster mother in Ireland and had no idea he had siblings, never mind four who were sent to Australia, until his sister Ellen traced him through National Insurance records.

Ellen had also married but was haunted by her childhood. She had been sexually abused in Australia by Christian Brothers who visited her orphanage, and was furious at the subsequent 'cover-up'. Indeed, Ellen later became active in the movement in Australia demanding justice for former child migrants.

I obtained copies of her correspondence, including a letter she wrote to church officials in 1989, shortly before finding him. The Belfast orphanage had claimed it had no records of her family, and advised her to 'forget the mistakes of the past'.

She replied: 'I am still trapped in my efforts of trying to trace my family and identity. I have letters to and from Catholic agencies who tell me they know nothing of my past.'

'I somehow ended up in Western Australia with the blessing of the Catholic Church, who decided to play God. And in their wisdom tore my family apart. Well done, you offered me two weeks' holiday in Australia and I'm still waiting to go home. LIES - WHY?'

'I was told repeatedly I was a war orphan by the nuns in the orphanage you dumped me in (More LIES. WHY?). No amount of counselling offered can make up for the trauma of losing one's family and identity.'

'The great plan to populate Australia with good Irish and British stock has failed. All they have achieved is heartache, rejection and misery, and one big cover-up. I won't give up my search.'

Ellen went to Ireland, marched into the Belfast orphanage and found the records she wanted. She enlisted the help of a genealogist who found Johnny, and a clan of cousins whom she visited in Donegal.

I traced the cousins, too, and they remembered Ellen's visit well. They were vague about details but confirmed the family's links.

Many of their uncles' and aunts' children had gone into care in Ireland and Scotland. They didn't see anything remarkable in that: it was just the way things were.

I could imagine the joy and excitement with which Ellen traced them, and her probable disappointment on actually meeting them. Ireland is constantly awash with the descendants of its huge diaspora, anxiously looking for roots.

To her new-found cousins, Ellen would most likely have seemed an enviably rich relation. Her sadness and ache for connection would have been incomprehensible to them. I had hit that reaction myself when I had traced some of my Donegal kin. No, they had not stayed in touch with her. Why had Lil told me nothing of this?

Johnny also told me the resourceful Ellen had traced Michael. Johnny told me: 'He was first raped when he was six. He had to have corrective surgery.'

Bitter: Ellen's 1989 letter to church officials complaining about her treatment

Michael was not 'well', and now lived in a hospital. My heart missed a beat, as if I guessed what was coming. Which one? 'Rampton,' said his brother. 'It's a special hospital.'

Rampton is a high-security hospital for the criminally insane. What had Michael done?

Johnny occasionally visited him and they talked by phone twice a week. Johnny was a kind Christian, and he and his wife had made a conscious decision not to ask.

Michael's Rampton social worker had reassured him that contact was safe. I was shown her letter saying simply that Michael had committed 'assaults' while so drunk that he had no memory of them. The social worker believed he was truly sorry.

Johnny concluded that Michael had got into 'scrapes' and was only put away for life owing to anti-Irish prejudice.

He had been deported to England after getting into trouble with the law in Australia as a young man, and it was considered a sign of madness when he told his extraordinary story about being a forced child migrant.

I didn't believe it was that simple. But still I didn't push, didn't dare ask questions that might yield awful answers. I did not doubt that Michael had an appalling time.

He was, it transpired, the first to go looking for his family. He went to Northern Ireland at the start of the Seventies, and in 1989 he wrote to Ellen about what he found there. He had been to the orphanage, the church where he was baptised and various pubs.

'They were stripped and deloused, then told their parents were dead - it was a cruel lie'

At one, he claimed, a gun was held to his head as a stranger. 'When I did explain my reason for being in Dungannon, I was left alone,' he wrote.

Michael told how he was directed to 'an old home for gypsies' in Stewartstown, after an elderly woman said that a man living there called Hugh O'Docherty was really named Hugh O'Rourke.

He then described a cryptic, brief encounter with a man who shiftily admitted he had to change his name to hide from the authorities, 'Ellen, love, I left an old lonely man standing in the driveway with tears in his eyes.'

Michael went to Bushmills and found a Jane O'Rourke. Reading his account, I became suspicious when he painted the scene, a chocolate box stereotype of old Ireland: 'She was sitting in a rocking chair outside her cottage.'

She supposedly admitted her husband was a Hugh O'Rourke, but 'she was strange and would not answer my questions. So I left her. Well, if they are still alive I will find out for you. This is your young brother Michael. Lots of love, I miss you, Big Sister.'

The social worker's and genealogist's inquiries of locals and a GP established that a Hugh O'Docherty had indeed lived at a Stewartstown 'doss house'. But no one knew if he was really Hugh O'Rourke.

Tracing kin and family truths in Ireland can feel like chasing chimeras, such is the sparseness and unreliability of records, especially in rural areas. I knew this from my own family search, of which I was also wearying. But it was the evasiveness I found hard to deal with.

I finally plucked up the courage to find out why Michael was in Rampton. I looked up old newspaper cuttings and, sure enough, there were several on Michael. I went icy cold when I read why he was really imprisoned.

Michael had twice been convicted of brutal attempted rapes on young women.

After the murder, Michael had handed himself in to the police and confessed. The first crime had been committed shortly after his failed search in Northern Ireland for his family.

Michael's social worker at Rampton wrote to Ellen explaining details of his crimes. 'Michael's explanation for this is that he was "hitting out at the world" because of the way he was treated as a child.

'Nevertheless, Michael has begun to realise that he cannot continue on this road because he has been on the path to nowhere.'

The social worker also helped Michael self-publish a heart-breaking account of his childhood in care called *I Was Just A Number*, which is held in the National Library of Australia.

'The Church decided to play God'

Reading it made me feel even more ashamed of my initial uncomprehending response to his criminality. Yes, Michael had done monstrous things, but far more monstrous were the ungodly men of God who ripped a weeping five-year-old from his sisters' grasp, renamed him Number Three, and abused him.

Michael's worst tormentor enjoyed holding him naked upside-down over a river while beating him, so that the water drowned out his cries. 'He told me it was easy to drown and accidents happen all the time.' Another enjoyed setting his dogs on him.

So this was where Britain's great experiment in replenishing the colonies had led. It was a brutal yet predictable outcome for the little boy abandoned to predatory priests.

I only found Michael's moving account, which explained so much, last week. Ten years ago, when I discovered those Press cuttings about his crimes, I was also saddened by his story but felt shocked and even contaminated.

Why had no one warned me? The Child Migrants Trust was in regular touch with him, and Michael's Rampton social worker had only mentioned 'assaults'.

I had been told he hoped soon to be released. What if I had invited him to visit me, and he had put me and my daughter at risk? If this was where family secrets led, then I wanted no more part in solving them.

I felt echoes from my childhood, of the grown-ups whispering and weeping, and me left outside, struggling to make sense of what was going on.

I did not tell Lil exactly what I had found out, although I intimated I was unhappy. Why had she had me retracing footsteps which her sister had already taken, and told me so little about Michael?

She said she knew little about him, or why he was in hospital. I eventually realised that the sisters had fallen out, and not shared much information. That too was perhaps inevitable: they had hardly grown up in circumstances that encouraged closeness.

Or was the real problem that the child migrants could not bear what they had found? No roses around the door and a warm welcome in the Donegal hills, but indifference and a brother driven mad and violent by his motherless, battered childhood. What if they had wanted me to look in the hope I could find a happier, alternative ending?

I backed off. Lil thanked me fulsomely. She and her three children, she said, now knew far more than before I searched.

Today, Michael O'Rourke is still in a secure psychiatric unit, and a sixth brother, Patrick John O'Rourke, born on March 7, 1945, remains untraced. There may be at least one other sister, too.

I was never to find documents finally proving the O'Rourkes' links with the travellers Ellen found, or work out exactly how their Hugh O'Rourke and my mother's missing ones linked. But the odds on them being 'some class of cousin', as they call it in Ireland, remained high.

Mum's uncle Hugh O'Rourke had married into her McCauleys. The child migrants were therefore her cousins' blood relatives, not ours. I'm deeply ashamed now to admit it, but I felt relieved.

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