

New film shows Ahern's apology for abuse was hollow

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Two forthcoming anniversaries remind us of an aspect of Irish history that is seldom addressed head-on: the way the children of the poor were dealt with.

Twenty years ago next month RTÉ broadcast the first episode of its groundbreaking documentary, *States of Fear*. Based on research carried out by Eoin O'Sullivan of Trinity College Dublin and produced by the late Mary Raftery, the series showed that the institutions into which working class children were deposited in alarming numbers did not nurture, educate and prepare them for adult life. Instead they were places where cruelty and neglect were endemic and where youthful optimism was replaced with fear, bitterness and despair.

Before the final episode was shown, Bertie Ahern, the Taoiseach, issued a state apology to the victims "for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue." The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was established and its report was published a decade later. Unusually for an official publication it became a best-seller.

We might be forgiven for thinking that a television programme from 1999 and a report from 2009 are no longer of pressing significance. Yet the issues that they raised have been reprised, with devastating effect, in a new film by Gerard Mannix Flynn. *Land without God* examines the Flynn family's experience of institutionalisation.

Flynn's brothers and sisters recall many years spent behind high walls. They speak frankly about how truanting and troublesome children were routed into industrial and reformatory schools, and later into mental hospitals and prisons.

In doing so they provide an articulate and dignified commentary on an approach to poverty and delinquency that left an enduring mark. The cumulative impact of their recollections is almost overwhelming.

The profound insight of this film is that the distress experienced by one generation affects the next. Nephews and nieces report how their lives were shaped by the unspoken experiences of their mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles. The ripple effects of absence, trauma and shame continue to distort young lives.

Flynn's skill is to elevate one family's story to a critique of a system that brought the full weight of the state to bear on some of its most defenceless citizens. He shows that the noble sentiments expressed in the Taoiseach's apology 20 years ago ring hollow.

Land without God is released later this year. Book a ticket and brace yourself.

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