

The Amulet Project, Folklore and Social Change

by Jenny Butler

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The Amulet Project brings together people's personal experiences of loss in the space of an art exhibition. Ten photographs are on display, each showing a memento connected to someone's lost infant. Matched to each photo is an audio clip of the parent speaking. Each story segment reveals something of that individual's subjective feelings but resonates in the surrounding context of shared experience.

An amulet is a small object thought to give protection against evil, danger or bad luck. In the context of the project, some objects were amulets in this sense, such as those created in the project's first phase: crocheted hearts and other items to be buried with stillborn babies. The objects in the photographs being exhibited are rather mementos or keepsakes, amulets of remembrance.

Even though the stories told through words and images are highly personal and belong to that individual, their presentation together is reflective of a particular kind of experience. It is revealing of how people deal with death, of how an object can have an ethereal quality and be special by virtue of that which it represents.

Each photograph is evocative of unique memories of a little life and particular moments in time. The tangible piece is invested with emotion and the associated story of a loved one's passing. These items are often kept in a safe place in the home, taken out almost ritualistically in recollection and honour of the dead baby. To allow for this exceptionally personal and special object to be photographed and exhibited publicly, where others can view it, is a considerably brave thing. Involvement in this project and the emotions expressed also reveal much about changing Irish society.

A consideration of Ireland's social history reminds us that the death of babies was not always given such acknowledgement. Pregnancy, childbirth and other 'women's issues' were taboo subjects that were not freely discussed in Ireland's past. Infant death was a subject not openly talked about and not given very much social recognition. In the past, and especially prior to the 1960s, the death of a baby who was not baptised was dealt with in a way that was very different to any other death in a family. Often, there was no death certificate, no funeral, no coffin and no tombstone. The difficulties wrought by the absence of officially sanctioned memorial services were compounded by the fact that the burial itself was often clandestine. These deaths were shrouded in secrecy and sometimes indignity, where the babies' bodies were placed in shoeboxes, buried at night out on the landscape.

The places on the landscape where these babies were buried are called *cillíní* (anglicised as killeens) or *ceallúnach*. The reality of the babies' interment in unmarked graves in officially anonymous plots of land had a huge social and cultural effect. The lack of official documentation of the bereavement and the physical segregation of the baby from the rest of society meant that there was no formal record of that person's life. The symbolic exclusion of

these short lives from normal social conventions and rituals connected to death meant that, officially and publicly at least, it was as if they never existed at all. The fact that the wider community shied away from discussing infant death must have made the grieving process all the more lonely and isolating for the family. Their grief was unrecognised by society and there was no sanctioned ritual to bring closure. The absence of an official gravesite meant that commemoration of the baby was also fraught with difficulty.

These ever-present but publicly unacknowledged lives, and the social secrecy that surrounded them, gave rise to much folklore. There are stories of babies' souls appearing to their mothers as little lights. Telling stories is itself a form of acknowledgement, perhaps at times a vehicle to express feelings, in a coded way, about loss.

People need to have a focal point for the expression of grief and a focus for the acknowledgement of a new life, whether that life existed in the womb or for a short time after birth. As the project reflects, bereaved parents keep objects representing those lost little lives. The object is a tangible focus for love and feelings about the baby that is no longer here. The project creates a sensitive forum for discussion, expression of emotion, and wider recognition of infant loss. The sharing of stories means the project provides opportunities to talk about these children and respectfully address the special objects associated with them. It encourages an open, public expression of feelings and memories, which might have been denied in Ireland's past.

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