

Discourse Series



Grangegorman: From the Era of Neglect to the Era of the Asylum - and Back?

13 December / 6pm (IST) / Royal Irish Academy



SPEAKER: Professor Brendan Kelly, Professor of Psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin; Consultant Psychiatrist at Tallaght University Hospital; Visiting Full Clinical Professor at UCD School of Medicine, University College Dublin

RESPONDENT: Catriona Crowe MRIA, historian and former Head of Special Projects at the National Archives of Ireland

In 1814, the Richmond Lunatic Asylum at Grangegorman in Dublin started an extraordinary programme of asylum building across Ireland, aimed at alleviating the suffering of people with mental illness who were homeless, in prison, or confined in appalling circumstances. By the mid-twentieth century, Ireland had proportionately more people in 'mental hospitals' than any other country in the world.

On a given night, the number of people in Ireland's psychiatric hospitals was more than double those in all our other institutions put together: prisons, laundries, mother and baby homes, industrial schools, orphanages. Why? And what is the legacy of this extraordinary system of coercive confinement? Ireland's mental health services changed substantially since the end of these asylums.

But has the pendulum swung too far? Today, we have the third lowest number of psychiatric beds in Europe, but we also have people with mental illness who are homeless, in prison, or languishing at home, untreated. Have we progressed beyond Grangegorman, or simply recreated the problems that the asylums set out to solve?

