

# Visiting Letterfrack

## *A painful experience*

BY BRIAN McNAMARA

**In 2014 in County Galway, I visited a powerful and poignant graveyard to the more than 140 young boys who died in the care of the Christian Brothers in their Industrial School at Letterfrack. The memorial (see over page) very clearly explained this terrible history.**

I went to Letterfrack because of its Quaker connections. I knew of an English Quaker industrialist from Bradford who paid for buildings including a Meeting House in order to give the locals work during the Famine. There we bought the book written about the Quaker Ellis family.

Knowing little, I found the Ellis land and buildings had been purchased by the Archbishop of Tuam in 1884 to become an industrial school, staffed by the Christian Brothers (who also had a presence here in New Zealand).

The graveyard at St Joseph's School is a simple tree-surrounded rectangle with small headstones and a memorial cross. It contains the graves of over 140 boys who died some eight decades ago. Other bodies we were told lie out in the bog. We met a couple in the carpark who told us that story. Miriam, my wife, was so angry she could not visit the graveyard, so I went alone.



Letterfrack graveyard

What the Ellis' and Quakers did in Letterfrack is worthy of the dedication that is made in Joan Johnson's book: "This book is dedicated to those who care to make a difference." They would have been shocked at what later came of their philanthropic efforts during the time of the Industrial School.

What happened in the time of its being an Industrial School was the antithesis of caring. Friends can find that story here. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\\_Joseph%27s\\_Industrial\\_School,\\_Letterfrack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Joseph%27s_Industrial_School,_Letterfrack)

After the visit to the graveyard, we stopped at a beautiful church built for forty families up on a wind-swept high moor at Creeragh in the Parish of Ballinakill. There a sign welcomed us, inviting us to be silent and pray. "If you are suffering ask for strength."

I did, to help deal with the pain of what Letterfrack had shown us.

I wrote most of the following poem in 2014 soon after our return to NZ from our trip to Ireland.



Letterfrack Church

## PACEM IN TERRIS

(Peace on earth. Peace in the earth.)

In an unquiet graveyard in West Ireland  
Lie seven score and more boys, at the hands  
of men entrusted with their care  
Abused, neglected, killed.

More lie outside the cemetery stones  
in the bogs and moors, unknown,  
uncounted, unconsidered,  
Abused, neglected, killed.

Letterfrack Industrial School,  
Christian Brothers' rule,  
A legacy of shame for boys  
Abused, neglected, killed.

Their names should resonate loudly  
through their bright deeds, proudly  
manifest; instead, there they lie  
Abused, neglected, killed.

Pope John XXIII wrote his Letter-  
"Pacem in Terris"- nothing better  
than I can now wish these buried boys,  
Abused, neglected, killed.

Peace in the earth, which now claims  
their brief lives; name and shame  
the cover-up by men and church who  
Abused, neglected, killed.

Name and shame those here in our land  
Far from Letterfrack, Galway, Ireland.  
The same history here as were boys there  
Abused, neglected, killed.

This Catholic boy no longer could bear  
That religious provenance, nor wear  
The smallest chance of complicity with those who  
Abused, neglected, killed.

Would that we could so lay to rest,  
(Faint hope only I fear in this breast),  
The anger and the injustice as best we can,  
Confused, infected, shilled.