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Presentation convents in County Tipperary: 1806 — 1900

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When we look at the development of convent life in Ireland over the last 200 years, it is obvious that something extraordinary is happening to the lives of women and by implication to the history of the country. Communities of female religious expanded dramatically during the 19th-century, but there had been a hidden group of nuns in Ireland before that period. The Poor Clares, for example, first arrived in the country in 1629 and set up a house in Ship Street in Dublin. The Carmelites and Dominicans arrived in 1640 and 1644 respectively.

All of these orders followed rules of enclosure and, it must be remembered, operated in a hostile climate and were suppressed from time to time under the Penal Laws. The late 18th century saw the establishment of the first native Irish congregation by Nano Nagle, and this foundation was eventually given canonical status as the Presentation Order in 1805.

By 1800 there were six religious orders with 120 nuns inhabiting eleven houses in the country. By 1851 that number had risen to 1,500 nuns residing in 95 convents and by 1901 to over 8,000 living in 368 convents and a total of 35 religious orders or congregations.¹

My purpose in this article is to look in some detail at the establishment of Presentation convents in the county of Tipperary for the period 1806 to 1900. The archival material available for such a study is in many instances scant, but enough remains to allow a limited investigation into the social and economic backgrounds of convent entrants. It is also possible to examine the structures of convent life in the county and the convents' relationship with the wider community. Before looking at the Tipperary case in detail, some information on the establishment of the Presentation order itself might prove interesting.

In general the founders of the native Irish congregations — Nano Nagle, Mary Aikenhead, Catherine McAuley and others — were women of independent wealth, and all of them had engaged in charitable work prior to establishing religious communities. Nano Nagle (1718—1784) had been educated in France and had passed an unsuccessful novitiate in a convent there. She operated poor schools in Cork city, using her own financial resources, from 1755.

We must remember that at the time of Nagle's schools the Penal Laws were still in force, and it was a courageous decision of hers to engage in the work she did. In the late 1760s her schools were threatened with closure unless some system of permanence could be provided for them. To this end she invited a French order, the Ursulines, to take over the schools, which they did in 1771. Four Irish women, Mary Kavanagh, Elizabeth Coppinger, Margaret Nagle and Eleanor Fitzsimons, had trained with the Ursulines in Paris for this purpose.²

Nagle herself did not join the Ursulines, and indeed became unhappy with the way the schools were conducted. The Ursulines were committed to solemn vows and enclosure, and therefore could not leave their convent to teach in four other schools that Nagle had established. In continuing her own work with the poor Nagle, along with three other women, established the Sisters of Charitable Instruction in Cork in 1766. From this time Nagle had also been in touch with a Dublin woman, Teresa Mulally (1728-1803), who had undertaken the education of the poor in that city.

Mulally had also organised a group of women who later in 1794 were incorporated into the order which was later to be named the Presentation Order. After Nagle's death in 1784 the congregation



which she had established, and whose members had taken simple vows which allowed them to work in the community, reverted to taking solemn vows in the hopes that the community would continue in its work and would also attract necessary recruits. The price of taking such vows, however, to enforce the rule of enclosure.³

The Presentation convent established in Carrick-on-Suir in May of 1813 was the twelfth foundation of the order in the country. Ellen and Mary Dwyer, sisters, entered the Waterford novitiate in 1806 with the purpose of establishing a convent in their home town of Carrick. Unfortunately Ellen died in 1812 and her property reverted to the proposed new foundation in Carrick. Eventually the foundation was made by Mary Dwyer, Mary Burke, Frances Smythe, a native of Kilkenny, and Margaret Power, who was appointed superior. It is not evident how much financial support these women brought to the convent, but the Annals note: "The . . . ladies . . . possessed good properties". Catherine Hayes, who entered the community in January of 1816, was also a native of the town, and the Annals note that "she brought a considerable property to the convent".⁴

The second Presentation convent in the country was established in Clonmel in October of 1813. This foundation was made from Dungarvan, and the three nuns, Mother Mary Joseph Sullivan, Mother Mary Peter Ronan and Sister Mary Magdalen Power, took up temporary residence near St Mary's Catholic Church until a more permanent arrangement could be made for them. It was not until 1828 that the foundation-stone for a new convent at Greenane was laid and in June of 1829 the nuns, driven by Charles Bianconi, entered their new home.⁵

Neither of these convents was instituted as soon as they were requested. In both instances women had first to be trained as religious before an establishment was possible, and often this could take a number of years. Also some form of funding had to be guaranteed for a new foundation and the support of the local clergy and lay community was also necessary.

It was the Thurles foundation which seems to have been the longest in arriving. The Rev. Dr. James Butler had asked Nano Nagle to send some sisters to Thurles in 1782. Unable to fulfil his request, Nano agreed to train any suitable postulant who might come from the town.

Anastasia Tobin joined Nano Nagle's community in Cork in 1782 and by July 1784 Anastasia's two sisters Mary and Margaret had also joined the community. It seems unlikely that the Tobin sisters were wealthy. When Anastasia and Mary left Cove lane only a small sum of money was returned to them. Margaret's education, according to the annalists of both North and South Presentation convents, was limited. Mary Tobin left the novitiate, deciding that this life did not suit her, and she returned to Thurles.

Anastasia pronounced her simple vows on 3 January 1785 and she too returned to Thurles, but not to establish a Presentation convent, as had originally been expected. Within 15 months she had joined the Ursuline convent in Cork and in 1787 once again returned to Thurles, this time to establish an Ursuline convent there. Margaret Tobin (who died in 1785) and received her habit in the Cork community in January 1785 remained there as an influential Mistress of Novices.⁶

Archbishop Butler left £2,000 in his will for the "poor of Thurles". In 1807 Dr. Bray, again hoping for the establishment of a Presentation convent, acquired a plot of ground in Chapel Lane for this purpose. However, there was much opposition, particularly from the clergy of the diocese, to this plan. A number of them felt that the money would be better used in establishing a seminary.

By 1814 a more definite step was taken towards the establishment of a community when Margaret Cormack entered the novitiate of the Presentation convent in Kilkenny. She was professed in 1817 and returned to Thurles, where she was provided with a thatched cottage in Stradavoher by her brother John.

In July she was joined by Sr. Augustine Power from Clonmel, who was appointed superior. They moved to Chapel Lane and in 1826 they moved into their new convent. It was from the Thurles



community that a foundation was made to Cashel in 1830, to Fethard in 1862, to Ballingarry in 1870, to Hospital in 1891 and to Dundrum in 1908.⁷

The women who joined these first convents were in the heroic mould. Membership of convents, particularly those established in the first half of the last century, required nonconformist behaviour. For instance, it was not customary for ladies to live together removed from direct male control nor was it customary to conduct poor schools on a vast scale. These women were overcoming social prescriptions, and the institutional impact of their work and their personal struggle led to innovations in how women could experience their lives in 19th-century Ireland.

From the records available it is clear that in the first decades of a convent's establishment family ties were an important feature in their development. The Presentation foundation made in Waterford in 1798 was to influence the establishment of convents in county Tipperary. In 1795 Eleanor Power and her widowed sister-in-law Margaret, wishing to establish a convent in Waterford, entered the Cork novitiate at the ages of 35 and 28 respectively. These women were also related to the parish priest of St John's parish in that city.⁸ In 1813 Margaret led the foundation to Carrick-on-Suir, where she remained until her death.

There are numerous examples of sisters entering convents. In the 1860s Mary and Margaret Hannigan joined the Carrick community at the ages of 33 and 31 respectively. Catherine and Nano Keeffe entered the Clonmel convent in the 1840s.⁹ In Fethard three sisters named Gubbins were active in the community in the 1860s. One of these, the mistress of novices, requested to be returned to Thurles as she thought it unwise to have three sisters within the same community. They also had a brother who sometimes preached at the convent.

The foundation in Fethard was made, according to the Annals, at the request of Dean Cantwell. It was a niece of Cantwell's, Sr. Mary Austin Hayes, who entered the Presentation convent in Thurles with the intention of establishing a community in Fethard, which she did in 1862. Another niece of Cantwell's entered the community directly on leaving school with the Ursuline community in 1864.¹⁰ When a Father Duggan visited Ballingarry convent just after its establishment, his sister accompanied him with a view to joining the community.¹¹

In all the Presentation convents set up in the county during this period the impetus for establishment is always, according to the Annals of the individual convents, placed with local clergymen or bishops. However, in some instances at least it is probable that the women who actually made the foundations were themselves anxious to organise on an institutional and religious basis.¹² The high incidence of sisters entering novitiates could lead to this conclusion. There may have been more agency within the hands of these women than the Annals allow for. Having relatives who were clergymen was always a valuable asset to a community or an individual nun, as was having clergymen sympathetic to the ideals of the convent.

Clergymen obviously offered guidance in spiritual matters within the convent; but they could also be of very practical benefit to the community. Ellen Connolly, for example, joined the Carrick community in 1819. After her profession she felt a life with the Cistercian order would be more suitable for her. She received permission to join such a community, but did not take too easily to their way of life. Within a few months she asked to be re-admitted to the convent in Carrick which request, the annalist notes, was "granted only through the mediation of the bishop and her brother Dr. Connolly, who was the vicar-general of the diocese".¹³

Any examination of the development and organisation of the lives and work of female religious reveals an institutional structure which was extremely practical. A convent was, and had to be, a homogeneous community in order to survive and function efficiently. Although there are no overall figures available for the Presentation convents in Tipperary, it is clear that not all women who wished to devote their life to a community were acceptable.



Reasons for leaving a novitiate were probably as varied as the women who entered, but annalists rarely record these women and only a few examples exist for the county. In Cashel one woman who entered in 1888 had gone by the end of 1889 through “delicacy and other causes”.¹⁴ In Carrick another woman, who had actually been professed, was forced to leave the convent though no reason was given for her departure.¹⁵ Generally a harsh regime was imposed on novices, and it is obvious that the expectations of some women regarding community life were not fulfilled by the reality of devotion to hard work and prayer which was demanded.

Age at entry to the Presentation convents in county Tipperary varied over the period under review from 16 years to 56 years. Most women appear to have joined the convents in their mid-twenties, when as lay women they would have been expected to marry. Recent studies have shown that a large proportion of Irishwomen could not have expected to marry in post-Famine Ireland.¹⁶ Their options were then emigration or spinsterhood.

The convent, however, provided another alternative. Since the provision of a dowry seems to have been an important part in ensuring marriage, and those who entered the convent as choir sisters brought substantial monies with them, it would seem that certain women were choosing between marriage and convent life and found the latter a more satisfying alternative. This may not, however, have been true for the poorer lay sister, who may have seen convent life more as an escape from dependence and economic instability in society.

As noted, ages at entry varied, but they tended to be higher in the first years of a convent’s existence than entrants who joined after mid-century. In Carrick, for example, the first twelve women who entered between 1812 and 1834 had an average age of 33, while from the 1840s on the average for entrants was 21.¹⁷

One woman who entered the novitiate in Ballingarry in 1873 was 56 years old.¹⁸ In Clonmel between 1814 and 1847 there were 32 entrants whose average age was 26 years, and they included one entrant of 52 and another of 43 years.¹⁹ From the 1850s the average entry age was 22 years. Generally entrants became younger as the century progressed.

TABLE 1					
AVERAGE AGE AT ENTRY ²⁰					
Cashel 1878—1900	Clonmel 1814—1900	Ballingarry 1873—1900	Carrick	Thurles	Fethard
23	24	27	24	?	?

The number of entrants also increased as the century progressed. Although entrance figures varied over the years, once a convent was established a steady stream of recruits presented themselves for religious life. A number of factors influenced entrance.²¹ It is interesting to note that most entrants in the early years of a convent’s establishment came from the immediate environment of the convent itself. In the first decades of the convent’s existence in Clonmel five of the twelve entrants came from the town, four came from Carrick and the others from Thurles and Waterford. By the last decades of the century recruits were coming from as far as Dublin.²²

Similarly in Carrick, most most entrants in the first 50 years of the convent’s existence came from counties Kilkenny, Waterford and Tipperary.²³ This limited geographical spread might be explained by the fact that the Presentation Order was a closed one and its work, particularly in the first years of a community’s establishment, would have been known only in the vicinity of the



convents. The recruiting ground for Presentation entrants might not have been as fertile as that for other communities.

Since most of their teaching was carried out in poor schools it is likely that possible recruits would not have been able to afford the necessary dowry. The convent in Ballingarry, which operated a boarding school, attracted quite a few entrants, perhaps because the nuns dealt with a wealthier clientele, the annalist there noting that “the greater number of our first boarders became nuns at home and abroad”.²⁴

TABLE 2					
NUMBER OF ENTRANTS ²⁵					
Cashel 1878—1900	Clonmel 814—1900	Ballingarry 871—1900	Carrick 1806—1900	Thurles 1834—75	Fethard ?
17	67	24	50	43	?

The number of entrants per decade to the convent in Carrick were as follow:

1812-20	1821-30	1831-40	1841-40	1851-60	1861-70	1871-80	1881-90	1891-1900
6	2	4	2	—	9	11	8	8

These figures can be compared with those for Ballingarry:

1871-80	1881-90	1891-1900
9	10	5

A solid religious vocation and sympathy with the ideals of a community were two essential elements in ensuring a successful life within a house. However, social homogeneity was also an important factor contributing to the success of a community. The choir nun, usually from a privileged background, carried out the public work for which the convent had been established.

The lay sister, generally from a lower class background and well-educated, carried out the domestic tasks within the convent. These orders did not challenge class relationships and maintained a two-tier system within their communities which allowed choir nuns to maintain their sense of class superiority.

Information on the rank of lay nun is almost non-existent in the material surveyed.²⁶ Lay sisters are noted only on entrance and disappear from the Annals after that initial mention. Lay nuns clearly did not have the same relationship to the convent that the choir nuns had. No provision for lay sisters had been made in the establishment of the Presentation Order, but convents were taking in lay sisters from the earliest decade of the 19th-century.

In 1830 a ruling was given on the matter by the Sacred Congregation in Rome which left it to the discretion of local communities.²⁷ Lay nuns followed different rules to those of the choir nuns. They observed the Rules of the Lay Sisters of St. Ursula and their dress was slightly different.

Presentation lay nuns wore aprons and short veils, unlike the long trains worn by choir nuns. They had no voting rights and were placed in rank below even the youngest of the choir nuns. Lay

nuns always took simple vows, while the choir nuns of the Presentation order took solemn vows. Of course, humility was a virtue to be practised by all nuns, but it seemed most incumbent on the lay nun, as the Presentation Directory advised:

Let them esteem their state above all things, as allowing them many great advantages for the attainment of a high degree of sanctity, and furnishing them with continual opportunities of practising humility and charity, which are the foundation and the completion of solid perfection.²⁸

The dowries which women brought to a community are a good indication of their social class. Again it is difficult to ascertain the amount of money brought to the convent by the majority of entrants in the 19th-century. There does not appear to be a fixed amount written in the convent Rules or terms of entrance. Hardiman in his *History of Galway* stated that the women who entered the Presentation convent in that city in the early 19th-century had to bring £500 each with them, but the figures for Tipperary vary widely.²⁹

One of the first entrants to the convent in Fethard was a Sr. Mary Joseph Coyne of Urlingford, who brought a substantial dowry of £600 and a pension of £30 *per annum* during her novitiate.³⁰ The Carrick annalist noted that the women who established the convent there were "possessed of good properties", and Catherine Hayes, who entered that community in January of 1816 and who was also a native of the town, was stated to "have brought considerable property to the convent and being highly educated she contributed largely to the advancement of the schools".³¹ Another woman who entered the convent in Clonmel had a dowry of £1,000, but later left for another community.³²

Convents, of course, needed dowries in order to survive and to supplement the income they received from other sources. From the evidence available for Tipperary it seems that some form of dowry had to be provided. One very interesting case of an unusual convent entrance illustrates this fact.

Anne M. Sargent was the daughter of a "gentleman of wealth and position in Waterford". Her mother, who was a Protestant, died when she was young and her father re-married. His new wife was Mary Anne Dillon, the widow of Captain James Dillon and a sister of the Most Reverend George Brown, bishop of Elphin. Anne Sargent converted to Catholicism, and she met with much family opposition when she announced her intention to join the Presentation community in Waterford. Her father refused to provide the necessary dowry, and Sargent's expenses were met by Edmund Rice up to the time of her profession. In 1810 when her dowry was not forthcoming she went as a postulant to the convent in Cork.

By this time her father had agreed to pay a dowry of £500, but the money was not ready when the time came for her profession. Sargent then completed a third novitiate in Clonmel, and finally her father relented and she was professed in 1816 in the newly established convent. Sargent was later elected superior of the convent and it was she, as M. Magdalen, who led a new foundation to Manchester in 1835. Sargent, who played a major role in the development of the Clonmel community, was obviously a serious and determined candidate for the religious life. Yet without a dowry it took her nine years to be professed.³³

Convent finances could often be precarious, and superiors and bursars had to ensure that the nuns could be maintained. The importance of individual dowries can be seen in one incident which occurred in Clonmel. When that community was requested in 1817 to establish a convent in Thurles, Mother Peter Ronan was expected to go. However, her pension of £40 *per annum* was too valuable to the community to give up. M. Augustine was sent instead.

When Mother Ronan's brother died intestate and she received her share of the property the Waterford nuns, who had some claim to the money as Ronan completed her novitiate there, gave



up her rights to the bulk sum but insisted on keeping the £40 annual annuity which had been payable to both Ronan and another sister, a Mother Joseph.³⁴

Convents did not receive funding through dowries alone. Many lay individuals also supported these foundations, and often family connections provided important sources of finance. Funding was provided by bequests or outright gifts to the communities, an indication of the support generally enjoyed by female religious communities. In 1875, for example, the Fethard community was left £150 by a Miss Holohan. This woman had a sister in the community to whom she also left £100, and she gave another £50 to the superior.³⁵

The chief contributors to the Clonmel foundation were a Rev. O'Donnell, bishop of Newfoundland, and a Miss Catherine Sullivan, who was the sister-in-law of the convent's founder.³⁶ Bazaars were also a common means of raising funds. A bazaar held in Fethard in 1884 realised the substantial sum of £570 for the building of a new convent chapel.³⁷

In Clonmel in 1856 a Mrs. Cott left a legacy of £1,400 to the convent for the benefit of poor children. In 1865, when the Clonmel community was engaged in building new schools, Miss Catherine Burke, who died intestate, left an estate valued at £2,800 which came to her three sisters who were members of the community.³⁸

Some of the convents also placed their schools under the National Board, which was established in 1832, though the requirements that religious and secular teaching be separate did not please them. Often it was a matter of financial expediency. In Cashel the convent received from £80 to £100 *per annum* from the Board. Under the direction of the Right Rev. Foran, the Presentation primary school in Clonmel was placed under the Board in 1841 but was removed by the Most Rev. Dr. O'Brien in 1862.³⁹

Individual nuns did not, of course, control their own money. Convent funds were managed by the mother Superior and the bursar, both positions of power within the community. According to the *Rules and Constitutions* of the order the bursar's function was

to receive and keep the money of the convent, and pay all the disbursements, which are always to be made according to the directions of the mother superior. She shall keep a faithful and exact account in writing of all the receipts and expenditures, which she shall lay every week before the mother superior, in presence of the discreets, to be audited and signed by her.⁴⁰

The accounts for Ballingarry, the only ones which are available, detail how much was spent each month on items such as meat, bread, eggs, porter and wine, amongst other items. Money came into the convent through a variety of ways. Dividends were received on shares; over £86 in 1879. In 1887 shares in the Great Southern and Western Railway yielded £41-13-3. Substantial amounts were also received through the "payment by results" scheme; almost £62 in 1879 and £76 in 1886. Of course, interest on dowries made up quite a large amount also, with £79 being realised in this way in 1887.⁴¹

The Presentation convents of Tipperary often went through periods of financial difficulty. In 1835 the Clonmel annalist noted that "the funds were extremely low, so the sisters had to endure many and continual privations. . . Butter at breakfast was a luxury unknown in those days. The first meal consisted of only bread and cocoa and the collation at night was similarly meagre".⁴² Much more hardship was to be endured during the years of the Famine.

The growth and expansion of religious communities during the last century shows that they were popular among those women who had a religious commitment and a desire to contribute, through charitable endeavour either in teaching or in other ways, to the wider community. The Presentation order, for example, although following the rule of enclosure, expanded significantly during the century; by 1874, 947 women were active in that community.⁴³

As with many religious foundations in the 19th-century the philanthropy of many lay Catholics,

both men and women, gave impetus to the establishment of local convents. Once established the laity were important sources of finance for further projects. For example, when the nuns in Thurles decided to open an orphanage in 1872, almost 80 per cent of the £1,300 cost was met by individuals in the locality.⁴⁴

Nuns described, and continued to describe, their entrance into convent life as a "vocation". This was a religious rhetoric that was approved and perhaps expected of these women, and it is difficult to assess motives for entry behind the "vocational" veil. Convent life in the 19th-century may have been appealing because it allowed freedom from familial obligations and allowed women to give expression to their intellectual and vocational aspirations.

In a society in which motherhood was held as the ideal for women, the notion of maternal spirituality increased both the acceptability and appeal of religious life. Also, once within a convent many women used the religious life as a vehicle for occupational advancement and self-expression. The convent, in short, offered nuns as women many opportunities unavailable to their lay peers.

It is clear also that many of these women, particularly those who achieved positions of power and authority within the convents, were women of ability and strong personality. The case of Anne Sargent, the superior at Clonmel, is probably a typical example. When the new convent was being built in Greenane she relayed instructions to the builders and tradesmen through a Presentation monk who had been requested to oversee the project.

The annalist noted that "the principal tradesmen referred to Mother Magdalen Sargent for directions while the building progressed. It was she who kept all the accounts and her advice was invariably referred to". Sargent obviously knew precisely what she wanted for the convent, and by keeping such control made sure her requirements were heeded.⁴⁵

The primary position of power within the convent was held by the Mother Superior. A superior was to be elected every three years and had to be at least 30 years old and professed for five years. In practice many of these rules were not enforced, particularly in the aftermath of a new establishment.

Often a superior who proved to be exceptional held on to this important post for many years. In Cashel, for instance, Lucy Ryan was elected superior in 1857, a post she held until her death in 1877.⁴⁶ In Carrick Catherine Hayes, the annalist noted, "several times . . . filled the office of superior".

Hayes was a native of the town, apparently wealthy and well educated and held a position appropriate to her status. Eileen O'Brien, of the same convent, held the position of superior for fifteen consecutive years with, the annalist notes, "permission from the Holy See".⁴⁷

Next in the hierarchy was the Mother Assistant, who would deputise in the superior's absence. The position of Bursar was also very important; this sister would work closely with the Mother Superior in order to control the convent's finances. Finally, the Mistress of Novices governed the process of the noviceship. She would have had considerable power to determine when novices took their vows and what work they did. All major decisions were made by this group of women. Again in the Cashel convent these positions of power were held by or shared amongst the same individuals for a long number of years.⁴⁸

The archives examined for this paper reveal very little information about the relationships which existed between the local clergy and the nuns. In most cases the clergy are praised for their support of the convent, but it is difficult to know what impact they had generally on convent life. By the end of the century all of these annals note the yearly visitations of the bishop. They may very well have left the nuns to their own devices and given advice only when requested.

However, in one instance at least, a large degree of control was held by a bishop. Dr. Slattery, the Thurles annalist noted, was adamant that the expenditure of the convent should not exceed its



income. "So particular was he", the annals continue, "that with the exception of diet and clothing, he forbade the smallest outlay without his special leave". Slattery's concern may have arisen from the fact that in the early years of his episcopacy the convent was often in financial difficulty. However, this example, although not repeated in other Presentation convents of the county, does show that ultimate authority lay with the clerics.⁴⁹

Convents are often viewed as havens of peace and contentment, but it must be remembered that when women entered a community they did not cease to be individuals. Although details of internal convent dynamics are vague, we have some obvious information in the different status which was applied to lay and choir nun. Convents were not necessarily havens of gender solidarity, and issues of class were just as powerful in deciding position within the convent as they were in the outside world. No lay nun, for example, ever achieved any office of power in these communities.

Some few examples of internal strife are apparent in the convents in Tipperary, echoing difficulties which existed in most religious communities in the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ One member of the Carrick community, for example, was noted as being "a very refractory sister" and seems to have caused quite a lot of disruption to the nuns. What "refractory" actually means in this instance is not made clear, but the annalist continues:

"every effort to reclaim her having failed the then bishop [Dr. O'Brien] considered it best in the interests of the community to get her dispensed from her vows and removed from the convent".⁵¹

The disturbance caused must have been quite serious to warrant such an outcome. The presence of this sister in the convent was also given as a reason why there were not recruits to the institution; once she departed the community apparently flourished anew.

Internal strife within a community affected the public perception of convent life and obviously also affected recruitment, which in turn, because of lack of dowries, threatened the financial security of a community. There were difficulties also in the Cashel community, which by the 1850s numbered only four choir and one lay nun. Mother M. Aloysius Greene, the superior in Thurles, spent three months in Cashel sorting out the trouble and in the end a new superior was elected. In 1860 when a new postulant entered she had been the first for 14 years. Three other women also entered that year, and by 1864 there were 18 choir nuns in Cashel and one lay sister.⁵²

The final area which needs to be examined in relation to the Presentation convents of Tipperary is the work that they carried out in the county. The initial function of the Order was to provide education for the poorest children in society. Once established in towns they set about this task immediately. In Clonmel, for example, the poor school opened in January 1814 and over 500 children attended in the first year. The same story was to be repeated in other Tipperary foundations. The nuns, however, did not limit their work to education alone. In Clonmel they visited the inmates of a "workhouse for aged females" which was close to their convent.⁵³

The hardest time for the convents came during the famine years when they tried to feed and nurse the destitute. In Thurles, for example, they looked after cholera victims. In Clonmel they served food to the starving on the lawn of the convent because the "number was so great". Many foreign benefactors also provided financial aid for the victims through the convents.⁵⁴

Innovation was a keyword in the work of the nuns at all times. They started some industries during the famine years to provide financial assistance to the poor. In Thurles work was given to young women and girls in spinning and weaving and glovemaking. The nuns employed two teachers from Belfast to give instruction and a Miss Cox was employed from England to teach glovemaking. In passing it may be noted that Miss Cox, described as a "bigoted Protestant", was converted to Catholicism by the nuns and was guaranteed employment by them so that she "might never suffer by her change in religion".⁵⁵

Knitting also employed large numbers, and the nuns in Thurles succeeded in securing orders from the army for "socks and mitts".⁵⁶ In Clonmel in 1852 Sr. M. Aquin returned from Manchester to teach crochet. It was stated that "young girls drove a distance of 16 miles to learn". Aquin sold the lace to French merchants who called frequently to the convent. By the late 1870s lacemaking was no longer in much demand and then the work fell through.⁵⁷

In Thurles the convent also opened a laundry, an orphanage and industrial school, the latter having room for 45 children in 1869. An industrial school opened in Cashel in the same year. In Clonmel the nuns started night classes for female factory workers in the town. In Ballingarry a boarding school was opened in 1887. In 1886 a Miss Kenny came to Thurles to introduce the nuns to the "kindergarten" system. Keeping up with the latest developments the Thurles schools became connected in 1897 with the South Kensington Science and Art Department in London and a number of teachers qualified in art.⁵⁸

The Presentation nuns of county Tipperary contributed a tremendous amount to the communities in which they operated. Their greatest service was in the field of education, but their contribution to society did not end there. Their role was also evangelical and the Catholic hierarchy recognised the important function women religious could play in strengthening the church structure.

Women in 19th-century Ireland were the primary transmitters of religious belief, through their work in the home and through their philanthropic work amongst the poor. Nuns continued this function on a much broader scale, bring official religion into the homes and lives of all the people with whom they came into contact. In pursuing their own religious life nuns were essentially agents of missionary activity.

There are still many questions which must be asked about convent life in 19th-century Ireland. What for example, became of those women who were not accepted into religious life? What was the real role of clerics in either the establishment or continuance of a particular institution? What impact did convents have on lay women?

From what we know of convent life they appear from a social perspective to have provided a viable and socially acceptable alternative to marriage, motherhood and even spinsterhood in 19th-century Irish society. Within a community women supported each other's work. Within convents nuns could achieve positions of authority and power unmatched by their peers in secular society.

In Tipperary, at least, their autonomy was rarely threatened by outside forces or influences, particularly after mid-century. Indeed, it should not surprise us that so many thousands of women did decide to become nuns in 19th-century Ireland.

FOOTNOTES

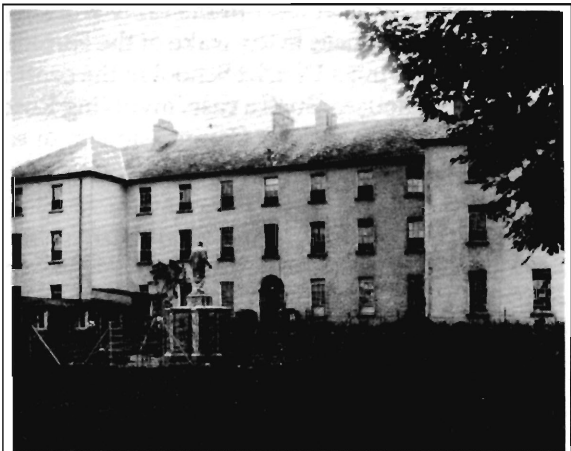
1. Tony Fahey, 'Nuns in the catholic church in Ireland in the nineteenth century', in Mary Cullen (ed.), *Girls Don't do Honours: Irish women in Education in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Dublin, 1987), p.7. For nuns in general see Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1987). *Idem*, "Walls within walls": nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland', in Chris Curtin et al, (eds.), *Gender in Irish Society* (Galway, 1987), pp.134-51; *idem*, 'The limits of female autonomy: nuns in nineteenth-century Ireland', in Marie Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds.), *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 15-50.
2. For general histories of the order see William Hutch, *Nano Nagle, Her Life, Her Labours, and Their Fruits* (Dublin, 1875); T.J. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin, 1959); M. Raphael Consedine P.B.V.M., *Listening Journey* (Victoria, 1983).
3. See Clear, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50. Walsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-181.
4. Ms Annals 1813-1990, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Carrick-on-Suir, (hereafter cited Annals, Carrick). The annals which are kept by the convents have no pagination or date. The narrative of the annals cites dates when important events occurred. Some of the books containing the annals also have a list of those women professed in the convent. In some convents there are separate books for this information.



5. Ms Annals 1813-1970, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Clonmel, (hereafter cited Annals, Clonmel). There is also a typescript copy of these annals in the convent, though this document does not contain all the information which is in the ms. For the establishment of various religious houses in Clonmel see *Parochial Survey of Waterford and Lismore* (Waterford, 1912), especially pp. 79-117.
6. Consedine, op. cit., pp. 100-2, 149-69.
7. For the Thurles foundation see Sister M. Liguori, 'Presentation Convent, Thurles, 1817-1917', in William Corbett and William Nolan, (eds.), *Thurles, The Cathedral Town* (Dublin, 1989), pp. 213-221; *Records and Memories of One Hundred Years, 1817-1917* (Thurles?, c. 1917). Ms Annals, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Thurles (hereafter cited Annals, Thurles).
8. M.C. Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted* (printed for private circulation, Waterford?, 1976) p.36; Annals, Carrick. Consedine, op. cit., pp. 131, 132, 167.
9. Annals, Carrick and Clonmel.
10. Ms Annals 1862-1990, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Fethard (hereafter cited Annals, Fethard).
11. Ms. Annals 1871-1926, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Ballingarry, (hereafter cited, Annals, Ballingarry). This convent provided the most extensive documentation. Besides the Ms annals there is also a Ms Annals and Accounts 1878-1955, 1 vol. (here the annals are a shortened version of those that appear in the 1871-1926 volume), a Ms Profession List 1871-1913, 1 vol., and a miscellaneous collection of newspaper cuttings and letters, most of which refer to the 20th century.
12. This argument is pursued by Mary L. Peckham, 'Re-emergence and early development of women's religious orders in Ireland, 1770-1850', *Women's History Working Papers*, no. 3 (1990), University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.
13. Annals, Carrick.
14. Ms Register of Elections and Annals of the Convent, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Cashel (hereafter cited Annals, Cashel).
15. Annals, Carrick.
16. See the various articles in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985); David Fitzpatrick, 'The modernization of the Irish female' in Patrick O'Flanagan et al (eds.), *Rural Ireland: Modernization and Change, 1600-1900* (Cork, 1987), pp. 162-80, and *idem.*, 'A share of the honeycomb: education, emigration and Irishwomen', in Mary Daly and David Dickson (eds.), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 167-87.
17. These figures have been compiled from the Ms Profession Book 1806-1921, 1 vol., Presentation Convent, Carrick-on-Suir. I have excluded those who did not complete their novitiate in Carrick.
18. Ms Profession List 1871-1913, 1 vol, Ballingarry. Excluded are those who did not complete their novitiate in the convent.
19. Ms Profession Book 1813-1938, 1 vol. Clonmel. Excluded are those who did not complete their novitiate in the convent.
20. These figures have been compiled from the sources cited in fns 17, 18 and 19 above. For a comparison with other convents see Clear, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-6, where she shows that for four convents from 1851 to 1900 average age at entry ranged from 26.2 to 21.1 years.
21. Clear discusses these varying factors in *ibid.*, pp. 69-99.
22. Ms Profession Book 1813-1938, 1 vol. Clonmel.
23. Ms Profession Book 1806-1921, 1 vol. Presentation Convent, Carrick.
24. Annals, Ballingarry.
25. The total number of entrants for all the years of a convent's existence in the 19th-century are not available. Those compiled for Thurles come from remarks made in the annals recounting the number of postulants entering during the episcopacy of Archbishop Slattery (1834-1857) and that of Archbishop Leahy (1857-75). The data for Fethard is scattered throughout the annals, and it is therefore difficult to provide an accurate figure on the number of entrants there.
26. For the lay nun see Clear, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-99 and *idem.*, 'Walls within walls'.



27. Consedine, op. cit., pp. 244-5.
28. Ibid., p. 245.
29. Cited in Clear, op. cit., p. 87.
30. Annals, Fethard.
31. Annals, Carrick.
32. Annals, Clonmel. See also the typescript annals, pp. 3-4, which records that this postulant had 'a large fortune in her own right which was a temptation to her relatives'. The relatives appear to have worn down the resolve of this individual to remain in Clonmel and she eventually left only to join another Presentation community later and the annalist notes, perhaps with a degree of glee, that 'she did not leave one penny to her covetous relatives, to their bitter disappointment'. Another postulant who entered Clonmel, a Miss Eliza Rivers, already had a sister in the community. The social status of this entrant is clear, as the annalist records that 'in the world Miss Rivers was a very gay and fashionable young lady. In the hunting field she was recognised as an accomplished horsewoman'.
33. For Sargent's story see Normoyle, op. cit., pp. 303-4; Annals, Clonmel; Presentation Convent, Clonmel, typescript annals, pp. 29-32; Presentation Roots, typescript copy of the annals of the South Presentation Convent, Cork, pp. 12, 14.
34. Annals, Clonmel.
35. Annals, Fethard.
36. Annals, Clonmel.
37. Annals, Fethard.
38. Annals, Clonmel.
39. Annals, Cashel and Clonmel. See also Liguori, art. cit., p. 218.
40. Consedine, op.cit., p. 421.
41. Ms Annals and Accounts 1878-1955. Ballingarry.
42. Typescript annals, Clonmel, p. 2. Annals, Clonmel.
43. Hutch, op. cit., sheet facing title page.
44. Annals, Thurles.
45. Typescript annals, Clonmel, pp. 10-11.
46. Ms Register of the Acts of Election of Superioress of the Presentation Convent, Cashel.
47. Annals, Carrick. See also Liguori, art.cit., p. 217.
48. Ms Register of the Acts of Election of Superioress of the Presentation Convent, Cashel.
49. Annals, Thurles.
50. See Clear, op. cit., pp. 53-68.
51. Annals, Carrick.
52. Annals, Cashel.
53. Typescript annals, Clonmel, p. 14.
54. Annals, Clonmel; Liguori, art. cit., pp. 217-8.
55. Annals, Thurles.
56. Ibid and also Liguori, art. cit., p. 218.
57. Annals, Clonmel.
58. Annals, Thurles and also Liguori, art. cit., p. 218. The nuns learned through a correspondence course and were successful in their examinations.



Presentation Convent, Clonmel — an old photograph before the porch was added

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