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Convents as Transnational Education Spaces in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: This article draws on primary source materials to discuss the transnational spaces of nineteenth-century convent schools, which were founded and built by religious women (nuns). The article argues that it is necessary to study the teaching Sisters and their convent schools in order to glean insight into the transnational mobility of the teaching Sisters, and the exchange of ideas between women in education spaces. Equally, gendered readings of the convent as an education space are needed. This article attempts to contribute towards starting a discussion around the nineteenth-century convent school as a transnational female education space, which was defined and delineated by both external and internal forces.

Keywords: Space; convent school; transnational; nineteenth-century education.

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1. Introduction

This article draws on primary source materials, to discuss how the transnational spaces of nineteenth-century convent schools were founded and built by women religious (nuns)[1]. I argue that it is necessary for scholarship to use transnational perspectives on the mobility of teaching Sisters, to help us to better understand the exchange of ideas between women in education spaces[2]. Equally, gendered readings of the convent as an education space are needed. This article attempts to contribute towards starting a discussion around the nineteenth-century convent school as a transnational female education space, which was defined and delineated by both external and internal forces.

[1] In the nineteenth century, Catholic women in religious «orders» took solemn vows and received the title «nun», while women in religious «congregations» took simple vows and were known as «Sisters». Throughout the article, the terms nun, woman religious, and Sister are used interchangeably, as is common in scholarship. See: Peckham Magray, 1988, p. 138.

[2] See for example Raftery (2015).

While the article mainly draws on sources about Irish-born nuns, these women both established and taught in schools in Canada, Australia, the Americas and India, and in the country of their birth. The article discusses the use of space within convent enclosures, and the education provided to novices in convent novitiates is noted[3]. Nuns frequently built novitiates close to their boarding schools and, for some pupils, entering the novitiate was like a continuation of their Catholic schooling. While convent schools were female spaces, it will be seen that many nuns challenged contemporary gendered expectations, by promoting academic schooling and professional training for girls.

2. Nuns and convent education: an area for research growth

Research into the role of women religious in education has grown since the 1970s, with particular growth in the field over the last two decades[4]. Groundwork was laid in the 1970s, when *American Quarterly* published Elizabeth Kolmer's «Catholic Women Religious and Women's History: A Survey of the Literature» (Kolmer, 1978). Later, Kolmer published an expanded historiographical study entitled *Religious Women in the United States: A Survey of the Influential Literature from 1950 to 1983* (Kolmer, 1984). Twenty years later, Carol Coburn's article, «An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious», provided an important resource for many early career researchers who were finding their way in the area (Coburn, 2004). Most recently, a survey paper by Bernadette McCauley has updated the literature review of the field (McCauley, 2014). The lack of historiographical work in Europe was a weakness, until *The Forgotten Contribution of the Teaching Sisters* was completed by Bart Hellinckx, Frank Simon, and Marc Depaepe, in 2009. This work put into context the small amount of high-quality work that had been done on European convents and Sister teachers. Historians including Rebecca Rogers (2005), Sarah Curtis (2000) and Phil Kilroy (2000) developed work on French convent education, while Carmen Mangion (2008), Catriona Clear (1987), Mary Peckham Magray (1998), Deirdre Raftery (2012; 2013a; 2013 b), and Barbara Walshe (2002) have used convent archives.

In Canada, scholars such as Rosa Bruno-Jofré (2005), and Elizabeth M. Smyth (2007) have worked at the intersection of female identity and convent life, offering insights into nuns as educators. American scholarship that has had a strong impact on the field includes the work of Carol Coborn and Martha Smith (1999), Margaret McGuinness (2013), and Anne M. Butler (2012). Work in Australia and New Zealand includes important new historical analyses of Loreto, Brigidine and Dominican education, by Mary Ryllis Clarke (2009), Jacinta Garaty (2013), Stephanie Burley (2012), and Jenny Collins (2004).

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[3] When a woman enters a religious Order and receives the habit, she becomes a novice and commences a period of formation (usually two years), before her first profession of vows. The term 'novitiate' refers to the time of preparation for the taking of vows, and also refers to the building in which novices live.

[4] This point is discussed more fully in Raftery (2012). See also: Raftery (2017).

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Despite the growth in research on Sister teachers, there has not been much work done on their main locus of activity: the convent school. Some work has explored the curriculum in convent schools, especially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Christine Lei (2000) has looked at the formal and hidden curriculum in Canadian Loretto education, while Marjet Derks (2008) has examined extra-curricular activities in Catholic secondary schools in Nijmegen. The educational praxis within convent schools has been explored in the work of Mona Gleason (2001), while Elizabeth M. Smyth and Anne V. O'Connor (1986) have written on the use of schoolbooks and the teaching of «accomplishments». All of these works testify to the fact that this is a growing area in research, and much more work is needed. This is so not only because of the sheer scale of the involvement of Sisters in education over at least three hundred years, but because much extant work has tended towards «thick description»: documentary accounts of convents, schools and nuns, that draw on archival materials and create an important chronological narrative[5]. The further development of this field of research depends, to some degree, on the willingness of scholars to utilize theoretical approaches in their analyses of data. The optic of transnationalism is selected for use in this article.

3. Transnational history and its utility for research on teaching Sisters

In my research on the global reach of nineteenth-century Irish-born teaching Sisters, I have worked at convent archives in Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, and many parts of the US and Europe. What became clear to me as I created databases of Irish-born teaching Sisters, and mapped their movements across the globe while they built and expanded schooling for girls, was that nineteenth-century nuns were transnational actors who must be positioned centrally in the history of education.

Joyce Goodman and Gary McCulloch have acknowledged «the difficult challenges of transnationalism». Nonetheless, the value of this conceptual tool for the history of education has been noted by scholars such as Lynne Trethewey and Kay Whitehead (2003). They have argued that deploying the «notion of transnationalism opens the way to exploring the rotation of people and ideas beyond national boundaries». In her work on Dutch education, Bakker (2014, p. 216) has discussed the «transnational circulation of pedagogical ideas and concepts», noting that «ideas do not move on their own, [and] cultural intermediaries or translators are involved in this process». Gabriela Ossenbach and Maria del Mar del Pozo (2011) also posit that transnational history allows «movement, ebb and circulation» to provide an analytical framework for the analysis of data. Transnational history, they observe, «... conceptualizes categories and identities, discovers networks united by bonds stronger than social class or ideology, and links narratives and experiences that transcend time and location...» (Ossenbach and del Pozo, 2011). Elsewhere I have written that transnationalism is an optic with which historians can most usefully examine missionary orders of teaching Sisters, who were united by the bonds formed by their shared Rule and Constitutions, and whose experiences in international

[5] The concept of «thick description» in history is derived from the work of Clifford Geertz. See Green and Troup (1999).

education were defined by their collective identity as members of an order, thereby transcending «time and location» (Raftery, 2015). This collective identity included that they shared a commitment to the transmission of faith. But archival evidence shows that they were also the «importers and exporters» of ideas around pedagogic content knowledge, and school culture.

Before examining the kinds of education that nineteenth-century teaching Sisters prioritised, it is important to acknowledge that they did not always have complete autonomy as they began new schools and created new foundations. At least some of them were part of the wider ambitions of their Church, and more immediately, of the Bishops who invited them to make a foundations. For example, when Bishop Michael Fleming brought a small group of Presentation Sisters from Ireland to Newfoundland in 1833, his aim was very clear. It was to establish convent schools for the daughers of islanders who worked mainly in the fisheries (Raftery, 2019). These girls traditionally started work at an early age, in the «fish rooms» or picking, washing and packing blueberries. They were likely to marry early, often to men who were much older, and have between five and eight children. The Bishop deplored their coarse language and the young age at which these girls drank alcohol and mixed freely with the opposite sex. He wrote:

> I judged it of essential importance to fix the character of the female portion of our community in virtue and innocence ... when once the future mothers are impressed with the truths of religion ... once their young minds are enlarged and enlightened and strengthened by educational knowledge, the domestic fireside is immediately made the most powerful auxiliary to the school ...

Bishop Fleming, who had no convent or school ready for his pioneering group of Irish nuns in 1833, very much left them to their devices in terms of devising a school plan.

The education these nuns delivered was, like that delivered by other Irish Sisters who went all over the globe in the nineteenth century, a version of the education which had received in Ireland in the first convent schools of the Ursuline, Loreto, and Presentation Sisters. This pattern of reproduction continued well into the twentieth century. For example, the Irish-born Sisters who founded and ran the Infant Jesus convents in many parts of Malaysia and Singapore, were invariably born in Cork and Kerry, to farming families. Most were educated in the Infant Jesus convent in Ireland where French was in daily use. These Irish women transposed, with little concession to local tastes, the «continental» education they had received, to Malaysia and Singapore, and also to Japan where their near-neighbours were the Religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart, a congregation with many Irish and English Sisters, whose schooling and novitiate life included speaking, reading and writing French, and a strong emphasis on music.

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4. Convents as female spaces

Scholarship over the last decade has considered several aspects of the «space» of school, and the materialities of schooling[6]. As Burke *et al* (2010) have noted, this kind of research has built on «the foundations set by studies of school building programmes of earlier periods published in the 1970s and 1980s»[7]. Surprisingly, there is almost no work on the convent school as an education space. Caroline Bowden (2005) has examined the enclosed space of convents in the seventeenth century, focussing on the experience of nuns, and Christine Trimingham Jack (2003) has done a micro-study of convent schooling in one Australian convent. However, there is need for much more work that considers the ways in which pupils experienced and used the spaces of convent schools, and in particular there is scope for much work on the nineteenth century – the period when convent schools expanded in number in Europe, North America, Australia, and parts of South East Asia.

Bowden's work on «English convents in exile» in the seventeenth century, shows that «convents needed to develop a reputation for themselves as quickly as possible in alien surroundings» (Bowden, 2005, p. 367). Founders tried to establish themselves in suitable buildings, so that they would attract new members who were able to bring dowries. Female monasteries needed to be «institutions that would attract parents of substance», and nuns were dependent on networks of families and friends, to help them secure good buildings and land (Bowden, 2005, p. 367). Founders usually then embarked on building projects, to expand and consolidate their foundations. Different parts of the convent were accessible to different nuns, depending on their role and status. The «lay sisters» who undertook the domestic work of the convent, were mainly confined to the kitchen, the refectory, and the kitchen garden. Some could leave the confines of the convent, to conduct business such as buying supplies. The «Choir Sisters», who were educated women of substance, recited or sang the Divine Office. In some Orders, choir and lay Sisters entered the convent chapel through a different door, and they had their own seating areas in the chapel (Bowden, 2005, p. 370). The hierarchy of religious life, then, determined the use of space within convents, from the seventeenth century onwards.

By the nineteenth century, with the growth of the conventual movement and the increasing involvement of nuns in the schooling of girls, the use of space within a convent enclosure becomes yet more complex. Orders with an «active» apostolate, undertook different work to «contemplative» Orders. Women religious became active in healthcare, education and social work. Those in education often undertook building projects at their convents, to add schoolrooms, dormitories, recreation spaces, and sports facilities, for the use of pupils. Convent schools were usually located within the grounds of the convent; often convents also had a novitiate building located within the grounds, where novices were prepared for religious life. The entire «campus» of a convent, by the mid-nineteenth century, was a female space with

[6] See for example Gutman and Coninck-Smith, 2008); Burke and Grosvenor, 2005.

[7] Burke et al. note in particular the work of Stuart Maclure (1984); Seaborne and Lowe (1971); Saint (1987).

multiple uses, and girls' experience of convent schooling was often determined by the kind of convent space that they occupied.

5. Education in convents: school life and school spaces

The purpose of convent schools was to provide girls with formation in the Catholic faith, and with the kind of education that supported the expression of Catholicity in their lives. Academic education for its own sake was not the purpose of convent schools, though across the nineteenth century teaching Sisters would become major players in the delivery of an academic curriculum for girls. Like the Sisters who taught them, pupils participated in «devotional exercises which included the rosary, forty hours» adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to the Sacred Heart, novenas and triduums, pilgrimages to shrines, processions and retreats (Kealy, 2007, p. 7). Convent schools had sodalities for girls, such as the Children of Mary, and indeed membership of such groups conferred a certain status on pupils. Religious congregations developed practices that were shared by their schools around the globe; the convent schools of the Society of the Sacred Heart, for example, awarded coloured ribbons to students, and the attainment of the blue ribbon by senior girls attested to their striving for both academic success and spiritual growth.

In addition to their observance of devotional practices, there were other ways in which convent schools around the globe were similar. For example, nineteenth-century convent schools – irrespective of which congregation owned them – were remarkably similar in their design, layout, and construction. As nuns travelled from country to country making new foundations, they sometimes directed their architects and designers to replicate the convents in which they had already lived. For example, the neo-Gothic style of convent that sprung up around Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, was replicated in Australia and Canada in the later nineteenth century, when Irish Presentation, Loreto, and Mercy nuns emigrated to make new foundations. These convents were typically built from granite, and their interiors boasted elegant cornicing, arches, long corridors, and the use of good timber for the construction of doors, windows, church pews, and refectory tables. While sometimes bishops provided convent buildings for the use of nuns, many female Orders relied on donations, dowries and inheritances to build their own convents. Unsurprisingly, they paid considerable attention to every stage of the construction process.

When a new convent school was established, the priority was the building of a chapel, or the designation of a room as a temporary chapel, until one could be built. Thereafter, nuns threw their energies and funds into building a refectory, dormitories and classrooms. Again, there is remarkable similarity in the design and construction of these school facilities in many convent schools owned by different religious Orders. Dormitories provided each girl with a bed, locker, and a curtain to give privacy and allow for modesty while dressing. Refectories were generally simple, with long communal tables. The later decades of the nineteenth century saw the addition of gymnasiums, as Swedish gymnastics and drill became popular for girls. The convents of the Dominican, Loreto and Ursuline Sisters, for example, were quick to adopt physical education for girls in their schools, and invested in equipment

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including dumb bells, vaulting horse, and parallel bars. As they travelled from Ireland to Canada, Australia, India and the Americas in the nineteenth century, many Irish Sisters brought with them the ideas, traditions and practices that would determine how they ran the new convents and schools that they founded. By examining the activities of individual Sisters, it becomes possible to get some idea of how they were implicated in the transnational transmission of education ideas.

6. Transnational networks and convent schools

One of the most compelling figures that I am currently researching, is Mother Michael Corcoran, who was fourth Superior General of the Loreto Sisters[8]. Corcoran had a long leadership, serving five terms, and had an exceptionally wide influence on branches of her congregation, especially in Australia, Canada and India. The Loretos were the Irish branch of the Mary Ward's Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM). They became established in Ireland in 1822 by Mother Teresa Ball, with the opening of her first convent, Loreto Abbey in Rathfarnham, Dublin. This was the «Mother House», from which many international foundations were made in Ball's lifetime, including those in India and Canada. The IBVM foundations made from Ireland were all known as Loreto Convents, and their community members were Loreto Sisters.

While Teresa Ball was the first Superior General of the Loretos, and Mother Michael Corcoran was its fourth Superior General, their terms of leadership were separated only by the brief periods of service of two other Superior Generals, and I would argue that it was Corcoran's long leadership and global vision that realised Ball's original ambitions. Corcoran's papers, and her valuable photographic collection, provide insights into the way in which Loreto schooling worldwide, developed its Eurocentric curricula, and *modus operandi.* Corcoran was stongly connected to her international foundations, writing regularly to Superiors such as Mother Gonzaga Barry in Australia.

How how was Corcoran's understanding of European education communicated to her large network of schools and convents, and what did she contribute to transnational education in Loreto schools? When she was first elected Superior General of the Loreto order in 1888, she became responsible for convents and schools in India, Mauritius, Canada, Australia, England, Spain and Ireland. These missions had been established between 1821 and 1888, and Ireland had sent many Sisters out from the Motherhouse at Rathfarnham Abbey, Dublin, to staff the schools and support expansion. Corcoran undertook a two-year Visitation of Loreto convents and schools between 1902 and 1904, spending a significant amount of time in India and Australia. Her letters from this period show her intense engagement with everything she saw, and a deep desire to communicate pedagogic ideas and global Loreto values, between the many convent schools she visited.

[8] The role of the Superior General included that she had responsibility for the leadership of the Order, in every convent within her jurisdiction. This could include convents in other countries. A Superior General also had oversight of all temporal and spiritual matters in her Order; her leadership team, which included a Bursar and a Novice Mistress, provided support.

Unusually for a woman of her time, – a very unusually for a nun – she was a keen photographer, and carried a large quantity of equipment on her journeys. Her tripod, camera, many mahogany cases of glass plates, and a large magic lantern, were all part of her luggage. Just as Corcoran wanted to bring the world to her Irish pupils, so too did she attempt to promote Irish culture at the Loreto schools that she visited in India, and Australia. For example, she had a shipment of Irish harps sent to Darjeeling, and she brought several stringed instruments back from India to Ireland. These instruments routinely appeared in the annual pageants at Dublin Loreto schools.

International travel was central to the creation of transnational spaces in convent schooling, and allowed teaching Sisters to gradually learn about the social and educational worlds into which they were moving. Examining the travel journals and letters of Sisters shows that it was common for groups of Sisters to receive temporary hospitality from other Orders, when they were travelling. These short visits provided Sisters with the opportunity for induction into the habits and educational practices of the host country, allowing for much-needed «acculturation and enculturation»[9]. For example, when Mother Gonzaga Barry brought a group of Irish Loreto Sisters (IBVM) to Melbourne in 1875, to open the first of their many Loreto convent schools in Australia, they were welcomed into the convent of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd (RGS), where they were told about schooling and education needs in Australia.

Just two years earlier, in the Spring of 1873, Mother Mary McKillop, foundress of the Australian Congregation of St Joseph (CSJ), travelled to France, England and Ireland to recruit for her teaching order and «to beg for supplies and books». Her travels offer an example of an Australian-born Sister bringing European pedagogic tools back to her own country. At many points in her journey, she had opportunities to learn about European education, and to gather education materials. In France, McKillop stayed with the Visitation nuns in Bordeaux, and the Notre Dame Sisters in Paris. In Ireland she was a guest at convents of the Ursulines (OSU) in Waterford, and the Sisters of Mercy (RSM) in Dublin[10]. On the 30th October, she wrote back to her Australian community to say that she was ready to return home, bringing «good supplies for the schools and many valuable works… for a good library»[11].

Records at convent archives in Newfoundland suggest that for decades after the first Irish Presentations arrived in 1833 there to establish convent schooling for girls, they relied on occasional packages of sheet music, copies of hymns, reading materials, lace patterns, and teaching supplies sent from Ireland. Writing to thank their Irish Sisters, the nuns in Newfoundland said that they had to teach reading

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[9] For a brief discussion of «…acculturation and enculturation, the transmission and adaptation of culture, and the relationship between dominant and receptive cultures» (Ossenbach & del Pozo, 2011, 583).

[10] M. Mary McKillop, Mercy Convent, Cappaquin, Waterford, to the CSJ Community, Sydney, 30 August 1874. CSJ Archives, Sydney. AP/91. Typescript copies of the letters of Mary McKillop, 1874, book 7.

[11] M. Mary McKillop, Convent of Mercy, Blandford Square, London to Mons. Kirby, Sydney, 30 October 1874. CSJ Archives, Sydney. AP/91. Typescript copies of the letters of Mary McKillop, 1874, book 7.

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by cutting up «advertisements and handbills, and forming them into words and syllables» (Raftery, 2019).

Sisters also benefitted from networks of lay people, who were connected to orders by the kinds of «strong bonds» that are characteristic of *histoire croisée*[12]*.* For example, in 1827, Mother Philippine Duchesne, Frenchwoman and member of the Society of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ), left Bourdeaux to make a foundation in America. Arriving in the US, «Mother Duchesne knew only Mr Mullanphy who was rich enough and zealous enough to help found a religious institution for orphans... [he] offered a brick house, pleasantly situated...[and] $1000 to cover the initial expenses»[13]. John Mullanphy was a wealthy Catholic landowner, John Mullanphy, whose daughter had entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in France[14]. He made loans to the order, some of which the Sisters repaid by drawing on funding from the hub of their own transnational network: the Mother House in Europe[15].

The Irish Loreto Sisters, including Gonzaga Barry, who arrived to open their first convent in Australia in 1875, were similarly supported by a circle of Catholic friends and contacts, including Mr and Mrs Walsh, who sent their carriage to transport the nuns as they gathered supplies for their new convent. The Walsh family also provided a «very grand» cow, hens, roosters, blankets, sheets, and «a bottle of Easter holy water»[16].

Gonzaga Barry's networking never ceased to be transnational: she continued to return to Europe for meetings, and to visit European convents, and she was a champion of letter writing – when travelling in Europe she reguarly wrote back to Australia, and insisted that her letters were shared with all the members of all of her Australian convents. Gonzaga Barry also introduced *Eucalyptus Blossoms,* a school magazine published for the edification of girls and teachers in all her Australian convents. It provided an window on the wider Loreto world, and the opportunities that education was affording Loreto pupils – especially those who pursued higher education. Indeed, Barry was so committed to scholarly Eurocentric schooling, that she brought a Cambridge graduate, Barbara Bell, to Australia to train her nuns in pedagogy, and to establish a college of teacher education.

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[12] See the work of Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman.

[13] MS Journal of the Society of the Sacred Heart, St Charles 1818-1840, 2 May 1827 (Series IV, St Louis Province). Sacred Heart Archives, USA and Canada Provinces, St Louis, MO.

[14] John Mullanphy was an Irish settler, who made his fortune from cotton and land. Mullanphy was the foremost merchant in the Mississippi Valley by the time Mother Duchesne arrived in St Louis in 1827, and he had an interest in supporting Catholic education. He left a legacy to the RSCJs, with terms which included that they would run an orphanage for twenty children, who would be given an education suited to «their station in life». See Louise Callan, *The Society of the Sacred Heart in North America* (New York and Chicago: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937).

[15] See Callan (1937).

[16] Mother M. Aloysuis Macken, MS Diary of the Foundation at Sydney, 1892. IBVM Archives, Ballarat.

7. Conclusion

Ossenbach and del Pozo (2011, p. 582), defining transnationalism, refer to a «system of relations [that] reaches across geographical locations». Research indicates that the transnational mobility of teaching Sisters impacted on the design and use of space in convent schools, and this is an area which merits close attention. Further, teaching Sisters used transnational networks in ways that supported their schools. What has not received attention in scholarship are the ways that this kind of transnational exchange was received; considerable work needs to be done drawing on school archives, and on the personal papers and autobiographical writings of former convent pupils, to get some understanding of how they viewed the «contribution of the teaching Sisters»[17].

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[17] Hellinckx et al, in their historiographical study *The Forgotten Contribution of the Teaching Sisters*, point to some relevant sources, and to scholarship that has begun to engage with the transmission and reception of education ideas across national boundaries.

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