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***‘Je suis d’aucune Nation’*: The Recruitment and Identity of Irish Women Religious
in the International Mission Field, c. 1840-1940**

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Abstract

This article examines the lives of Irish-born women religious around the world, in the period 1840-1940. Ireland sent thousands of nuns overseas as teachers and missionaries, to work in schools, orphanages, and hospitals in Sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia, the Americas, Australia, and Europe. Looking at contemporaneous views of missionary work, recruitment to religious life, and the social conditions for Irish women during and after the years of the Great Famine, the article determines some of the attraction of religious life for Irish women, and the expression of their Irish identity to be found in convents internationally.¹ The article concludes with comments on the bifurcated identity of Irish women religious who, though first and foremost members of particular religious orders, were often identified by others as “Irish Nuns.”

¹ Research for this article has received support for which this author is grateful. The Ireland-Canada University Foundation supported research into the lives of Irish women religious in Canada. Material on Irish women religious in America was gathered following the receipt of a Hibernian Research Award, from the CUSHWA Centre for the Study of American Catholicism, at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. Some of the translation of French material from the Society of the Sacred Heart General Archives, Rome; the Society of the Sacred Heart Archives, Dublin; and the National Archives, Society of the Sacred Heart, Canadian and United States Provinces, St. Louis, Missouri, was supported by an award from SCoTENS.

Introduction

For many nuns born in Ireland, their Irish identity was secondary to their identity as members of particular religious congregations.² In living consecrated lives, within orders that had specific rules and constitutions, distinctive habits, and unique charisms, Irish women shared the collective identity of the orders they joined. However, despite the ways in which community life erased many aspects of individuality, the national identity of some sisters was not easily erased. In this article, it will be seen that the Irish identity of nuns referred not only to their place of birth, but also to that which made them nuns recognizable for their place of origin: this could include accent, sensibility, and the expression of their faith.

In contrast to the nineteenth-century nuns whose Irish identity was overt, many Irish women who joined orders of French foundation had their Irish identity diluted by their adoption of French language and culture. They spoke, read, and wrote French; they often spent time in France for their novitiate year or for final profession; and they gave a privileged position to French in the classrooms of their schools. The fractured identity of Irish women religious in orders of French foundation was articulated in 1883 by Fanny Cronin, RSCJ, writing from Ireland to the Superior General of the Society of the Sacred Heart: “*Je ne suis ni française, ni irlandaise; je suis d’aucune Nation; je suis Cosmopolitaine, Religieuse du S. Coeur.*”³ The fictional Reverend Mother in Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* echoed the same sentiment when a curate objected to the “foreign” traditions she promoted in her Dublin convent school. She asserted: “our nuns *are not* a nation, and our business is not with

² This author recognizes that in the nineteenth century Catholic Church, women in religious “orders” took solemn vows and received the title “nun,” and that women in “congregations” took simple vows and were called “Sister.” Throughout the article, the terms nun, woman religious, and Sister are used interchangeably, as is common in scholarship. See Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 138. While there were many nuns, particularly in the United States, who were second-generation Irish, and who identified strongly with their Irish heritage, only those born in Ireland are treated within the scope of this article.

³ Fanny Cronin, RSCJ, to Rev. M. Lehon, RSCJ, 20 November 1883, Society of the Sacred Heart General Archives, Rome (hereafter SSHGA), C IV.

national matters. We are a religious order.”⁴ However, while O’Brien’s Reverend Mother and Fanny Cronin, RSCJ, may have thought of their religious communities as women of no nationality, in reality the Irish identity of nuns was rarely ignored by others. It can be found implicated in compliments, veiled insults, careful reflection, light-hearted banter, and even pseudo-psychoanalysis. This article examines the pervasiveness of national identity in records of Irish missionary nuns, who entered orders that did not originate in Ireland, and that had continental influences.⁵

Irish women religious have been involved in education in the international mission field since the early nineteenth century. There has been particular interest among researchers in the contribution of Irish nuns who went to the United States, but less is known about their missionary activity in other parts of the world.⁶ Suellen Hoy, influenced by the earlier work of Hasia Diner, developed useful scholarship on Irish nuns who immigrated to the United States, starting with the Ursulines who went from Cork to New York in 1812 and began what Hoy termed the “first wave” in the migration of Irish nuns to the New World.⁷ Hoy considered the first wave to have spanned the period 1812-1881, and she has shown how it was marked by the pioneering task of making new foundations. A “second wave” from the

⁴ Kate O’Brien, *The Land of Spices* (1st edition, 1941; this edition, UK: Virago Modern Classics, 1988), 15.

⁵ Much work has been done on indigenous orders such as the Mercy and Presentation Sisters, but less has been done on orders that came in to Ireland to make foundations, educate girls, and recruit Sisters for their missionary convents.

⁶ The contributions of Irish nuns are included in Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); John J. Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (New York, St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003); and Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York’s Welfare System, 1830-1920* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁷ See Suellen Hoy, “The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women to the United States, 1812-1914,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6, no. 4 / 7, no. 1 (1995), 64. For a discussion of Irish women, including women religious, and migration see: Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

late 1860s to the early twentieth century consolidated the work of the early founders and responded to the needs of the Catholic Church, providing a steady supply of teaching sisters to the rapidly expanding parochial school system in the United States.⁸

The research project from which this article is drawn takes its impetus from Hoy's work, but expands in scope to include Irish nuns who had missions to other parts of the globe. Hoy estimated that "between 4000 and 7000 Irish women emigrated to the United States as nuns (professed, novices, postulants or aspirants) from 1812... [to] 1914."⁹ While it is not yet possible to estimate a figure for the global presence of Irish women in religious life, it is possible that as many as 20,000 Irish nuns were involved in teaching orders internationally, between the start of the nineteenth century and the Second Vatican Council.¹⁰ This article provides an examination of sources – including convent annals, entrance records, biographical information, obituaries, and popular print culture – to determine the reasons why thousands of Irish women went overseas to teach between 1840 and 1940. It also explores how the Irish identity of these women was perceived abroad. While many orders are referenced in this article, particular attention is paid to three orders for which detailed databases on Irish women have been developed: the Infant Jesus Sisters (IJS), the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (RSCJ), and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) or Loreto Sisters.

⁸ Ibid., 64-65.

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ This article draws on data currently being compiled and analyzed by this author, for a history of Irish women religious in the international mission field. The research process has included creating searchable databases on Irish-born members of missionary orders, which allows the missionary activity of thousands of sisters to be traced over countries and continents, during a period of 150 years. The databases have been prepared with material collected at archives in the USA, Canada, Rome, Paris, Singapore, and Ireland. Second-generation Irish nuns are also recorded, though separately, thereby including women religious born to Irish parents who had emigrated from Ireland. Because the ongoing research process includes that the Irish identities of members of religious orders are still being adjusted (added/deleted), the figures given in this article are approximate, and not fixed.

Irish women religious in the international mission field

Like the Irish Ursulines who left for the United States in 1812, the Irish Presentation Sisters were also early to enter the mission field, sending Sisters to Newfoundland in 1833. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary made a foundation from Dublin in Calcutta in 1841, while the Irish Mercy Sisters were in parts of England in the 1830s and 1840s, expanding in Australia in 1846 and in America in 1851. The 1840s saw Irish Loreto Sisters make foundations in Mauritius, Gibraltar, and Canada, while the 1850s saw very rapid Mercy expansion internationally fueled by Irish vocations. By the end of the century, many other orders – such as the Dominicans, the Society of the Sacred Heart, the Infant Jesus Sisters, the Good Shepherd Sisters, the Brigidines, the Poor Clares, and the Irish Sisters of Charity – also expanded overseas, sending thousands of Irish nuns to work at schools, in healthcare, and in the care of orphaned children.¹¹

But the dates of Irish foundations are not a good indicator of the start of Irish missionary activity; there were Irish women in orders including the Infant Jesus Sisters, the Sisters of St. Louis, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, and the Society of the Sacred Heart long before these orders had a presence in Ireland. For example, although Infant Jesus Sisters did not make a foundation in Ireland until 1909, forty-three Irish women had entered the order between 1824 and 1902, typically making their novitiate in Paris before being sent to Singapore.¹² Similarly, while the Sisters of St. Louis did not arrive into Ireland until 1859, twenty-nine Irish women had made their way to the novitiate in Juilly, in the period 1841-58.¹³ Indeed, the opening of a novitiate in Ireland is not a good predictor of Irish vocations. As will be seen below, although the Society of the Sacred Heart had several convents in

¹¹ “MS Foundations of American Women’s Religious Orders, 1812-1921,” in Suellen Hoy Papers, Series 3, Box 3, Ida Gannon Centre for Women and Leadership, Loyola University (hereafter, Hoy Papers, IGC Loyola).

¹² Data drawn from *Register* (Black Book), Infant Jesus Archives, Ireland (hereafter, IJSA, Ireland).

¹³ Data drawn from “MS Cahier d’entrée 1841-1845: Irlandaises Entrées au Noviciat des Dames de St. Louis à Juilly.” Sisters of St. Louis General Archive, Ireland (hereafter, SSLGA, Ireland).

Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, a sizeable proportion of all Irish women who became RSCJs at that time entered in the United States.

Though the orders mentioned above served different constituencies, they were united by their desire to share their Catholic faith. Some sisters went, at the invitation of Bishops, to parishes where schools for Catholics were needed, “animated with the laudable desire of helping to propagate the faith of their fathers in that greater Ireland beyond the sea.”¹⁴ Others not only founded schools in Catholic areas but also had what was then called a mission for the “conversion of pagans,” and they responded to this by making foundations in non-Christian countries.

It was not unusual for religious orders to serve both types of mission, and this was the case for the three orders forming the focus of this article: the Infant Jesus Sisters, the Society of the Sacred Heart, and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin (known internationally as the Loreto Sisters, and spelled “Loretto” in Canada). Irish members of these orders taught variously in Catholic parishes in the United States, Canada, and the UK, and they also taught and worked amongst non-Christians in countries such as Japan, India, Malaysia, and Singapore.¹⁵ They had in common their Ignatian spirituality and the influences of continental Europe, and they “brought France” into convents in rural and urban Ireland, and “sent Ireland” into convents as far as Japan, Malaysia, India, and Australia.

The institute of the Infant Jesus Sisters (1662) originated in France, and was originally known as the *Congrégation des Soeurs de l’Instruction Charitable du Saint Enfant-*

¹⁴ “Irish postulants for American Convents,” *Cork Examiner*, 1 March 1898.

¹⁵ Many Irish Infant Jesus Sisters went to Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they were also part of twentieth-century foundations in Australia and the USA. The Society of the Sacred Heart opened schools along the Mississippi, educating Christians and Native Americans, in addition to running schools for large Catholic communities in cities such as New York and Chicago. Irish Loreto Sisters displayed an early commitment to teaching non-Christians when they made foundations in India in the nineteenth century, while their Canadian schools – also founded in the nineteenth century – catered for Christians, most of whom were Catholic.

Jésus.¹⁶ It spread rapidly in France, and was in ninety-six French villages by the outbreak of the French Revolution. Though it emerged diminished from the Revolution, the Sisters continued their work in education and chose to expand outside of France in 1852 when they began a mission school in former Malaya. By the late nineteenth century, the order was opening schools at a rapid rate in South East Asia. In part, the Sisters were responding to a need for Christian education in British colonial settlements, but they also pursued their own mission to spread Christianity and provide education to the poor.

Demand for English-speaking Sisters was high, and when the order failed to find sufficient vocations in England, they turned their attention to Ireland in 1909. They quickly established a convent, boarding school, and novitiate at Drishane Castle, in Co. Cork. The convent made a sustained contribution to the international mission field, especially to schooling in South East Asia, until the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Born in Strabane in 1829, Jane Connolly was the first Irish woman to enter the order in Paris in 1851. Known in religion as Madame St. Gregory, she experienced almost all of the order's mission schools in South East Asia. In 1873, the order was the first to open a convent school in Japan, and Madame St. Gregory was part of the pioneering group that sailed from Penang to Yokohama.

The Society of the Sacred Heart (1800) was also a French order, and its founding mother was Madeleine Sophie Barat.¹⁸ Although established in France much later than the Infant Jesus Sisters, the Society arrived in Ireland at a considerably earlier point (1853), and was successful in attracting girls to its schools and young women to its novitiates. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the "mission" which most of the Irish-born Religious

¹⁶ The motherhouse of the Institute is on the Rue St. Maur, Paris, and the Sisters in France were often known as the Dames de St. Maur.

¹⁷ See Catherine KilBride and Deirdre Raftery, *The Voyage Out: Infant Jesus Sisters, Ireland, 1909-2009* (Dublin: Origin/IJS, 2009).

¹⁸ See Phil Kilroy, *Madeleine Sophie Barat: A Life* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000); and Phil Kilroy, *The Society of the Sacred Heart in Nineteenth-Century France, 1800-1865* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012).

of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ) had was to the United States. As will be seen later, approximately 52% of all Irish-born women to enter the Society in the period 1831-1900 did so in the United States, having first emigrated from Ireland.¹⁹ Some of the first Irish women to become RSCJs entered in St. Louis in the 1830s and 1840s, as part of the Society's pioneering mission to the United States, under the leadership of Mother Philippine Duchesne.

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) was established in Ireland in 1821, when Mother Teresa Ball, herself an Irish woman and member of the Institute, left the Bar Convent in York to make the first IBVM foundation overseas: Loreto Abbey, at Rathfarnham in Dublin.²⁰ Loreto Abbey became a rich source of vocations to missionary life. Mother Ball sent Mother Delphina Harte together with thirteen Irish Loretos (seven Sisters and six novices) to Calcutta in 1841 to make the first of several Indian foundations; meanwhile, Mother Ignatia Hutchinson, with five Sisters, left Loreto Abbey to establish the Institute in Canada in 1847. While the Institute of the Blessed Virgin originated in England and not in France, the animating spirit of its convents and schools in Ireland was much closer to those of orders of French foundation, such as the Sacred Heart and Infant Jesus schools. Each of these orders placed a strong emphasis on French, and on the Arts – particularly music.

The orders benefited from the devotional revolution that swept Ireland in the nineteenth century,²¹ and together they would send hundreds of Irish women to teach at their convents around the globe. Whether they had come to Ireland at the request of a Bishop, or at their own instigation, each of these orders found that the country was a fertile ground for

¹⁹ Figures calculated from databases developed by this author at the Society of the Sacred Heart archives in Ireland, Rome, and USA.

²⁰ See *Joyful Mother of Children: Mother Frances Mary Teresa Ball*, by a Loreto Sister (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son Ltd., 1961).

²¹ See Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875," *American Historical Review* 77 (1972). He argues that a revolution in Irish devotional practice occurred immediately following the famine of 1845-1851. Ways in which historians have challenged Larkin's thesis are discussed in Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns*, 4-5.

vocations, and several factors combined to ensure a steady supply of Irish nuns for their overseas schools.²²

Women in nineteenth-century Irish society: Factors influencing the growth of vocations to religious life

The growth in religious vocations for Irish women increased rapidly in nineteenth-century Ireland. With the repeal of relevant Penal Laws at the end of the eighteenth century, and the growing confidence of the Catholic Church in Ireland as a consequence of Catholic Emancipation, it was possible for Catholic orders of priests, brothers, and nuns to establish schools for the overwhelmingly Catholic population. It is perhaps not surprising to see the speed with which the landscape of religious life changed: while there were approximately 122 nuns in Ireland in 1800, by 1901 there were 8,031, giving a ratio of one nun per 400 members of the population.²³ Convents spread across the country, with a concentration of them to be found in Dublin and the southern part of the country. The careful analysis of the geographical distribution made by Catriona Clear indicates the dominance of the landscape by some orders; for example, Presentation convents were established every two to three years over a period of sixty years (1789-1850), with the result that by mid-century they accounted for half of the ninety-one convents in the country.²⁴

²² It was Dr. Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin and close friend of the Ball family, who encouraged Teresa Ball to enter the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary at York, and to later make the first IBVM foundation in Ireland. The decision of the Infant Jesus Sisters to come to Ireland was their own, as they recognized that they needed a greater supply of English-speaking missionary nuns for their convents in Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore. With the help of Père Charles Nain, a priest from the Séminaire des Missions Etrangères de Paris, they identified Kerry as a suitable site for their first convent and novitiate. Their arrival was not greeted warmly by the Bishop of Kerry, who considered that they were “forcing themselves into this diocese where there is no want to be supplied by them.” MS letter from Bishop Mangan to Canon Casey, n.d [January 1909], IJS GA, Ireland.

²³ See Hoy, “The Journey Out,” 70. See also: Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns*, 9.

²⁴ See Catriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), 36-39.

In the second half of the century, not only were a further 277 convents built, but the rate of vocations increased nine-fold.²⁵ In the middle decades of the century growth was most dramatic, with 68% growth in the number of nuns in the period 1860-1869. Why did increasing numbers of Irish women enter convents at this time? The “call” to religious life, or religious vocation, may have reflected the availability of a more active apostolate for women from the early nineteenth century, at which time the Holy See began to grant approval to congregations with simple vows. There was a proliferation of small new female congregations by the mid-nineteenth century, and as they grew in Ireland they attracted young women who wanted to devote their lives to serving others, typically through teaching or nursing. That increasing numbers of girls were sensitive to the “call” to religious life was doubtless influenced by the greater presence of nuns, who now only observed partial cloister, and who were deeply involved in the spiritual preparation of young girls in convent schools. Regular prayer, daily Mass, novenas, the celebration of feast days, and participation in sodalities were all features of convent schooling that helped to prepare young women to be receptive to a religious vocation and attuned to the rhythms of religious life.²⁶

While it is acknowledged that many, if not most, women who chose religious life did so because they believed they had a vocation, it is important to acknowledge that some had other motivations. This is often acknowledged by former women religious, and indeed orders recognized that women could enter convents for the wrong reason, and had many careful mechanisms for detecting unsuitability for religious life in novices. But equally, a woman could enter religious life without a strong sense of vocation, and still be an effective teacher and a good leader. Some of the leadership possibilities that religious life presented to women

²⁵ For a discussion of the increase in vocations see Anthony Fahey, *Female Asceticism in the Catholic Church: A Case Study of Nuns in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Illinois, 1982); for an analysis of the spread of convents in Ireland, see chapter two of Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland*.

²⁶ For a discussion of this see Deirdre Raftery, “The ‘Mission’ of Nuns in Female Education,” *Paedagogica Historica* 48, no. 2 (2012).

have been noted by Fahey (1982), who commented that “the Catholic Church provided an option in life to its female members that had no counterpart in the Protestant churches and denominations.”²⁷ While Fahey acknowledges the subordinate position of women within the Catholic Church, and the fact that they could not take holy orders, it will be seen below that women religious could nonetheless occupy positions of authority and influence that might not otherwise have been available to their secular counterparts.

The possibilities for an active life with opportunities to teach and to offer leadership in schools internationally doubtless attracted some Irish women to religious life. These women would have been choir sisters, entering with an education and possibly a dowry. Not all orders required that entrants bring a dowry, and in mid-nineteenth century Ireland the requirement of a dowry would have made religious life impossible for many women. A dowry was not a condition of acceptance for women who wanted to become Infant Jesus, Loreto, or Sacred Heart Sisters; these orders considered that an education was a very acceptable form of dowry. A solid schooling was good preparation for religious life and for teaching, while a girl who entered with “superior” or second-level schooling, or with languages and the experience of continental travel, was often destined for leadership.

Having avoided economic dependency on men and reliance on marriage and kinship networks, women religious developed their own models for the management of both money and personnel. This allowed them not only to make strategic decisions concerning expansion and building, but also to support some of their financially weaker institutions.²⁸ It was in exactly this way that Mother Teresa Ball, IBVM, acting from Loreto Abbey in Dublin, directly influenced the expansion of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Canada. The

²⁷ Fahey, *Female Asceticism in the Catholic Church*, 5.

²⁸ Deirdre Raftery, “A Great Builder’: Nineteenth-century Women Religious and Strategies for Convent Expansion,” Ninth Triennial Conference of the History of Women Religious, USA (2013).

Canadian foundations were made and managed by Irish choir Sisters, and Irish lay Sisters were often involved in running the convents.²⁹

Arguably the most influential and hardworking of these pioneers in Canada was Mother Teresa Dease, IBVM, whom Teresa Ball had sent to Toronto in 1847. By 1851, she was Superior General in Canada. Dease's correspondence with Teresa Ball demonstrates not only the frequency with which these two women communicated on almost every aspect of the expansion of the Institute in Canada, but also Dease's occasional reliance on funds from Ireland. On 20 April 1851, Dease wrote to Ball to say that the success of the Institute in America depended on "assistance from home."³⁰ The assistance received came in the form of additional Sisters and money, and both were moved between convents as the Superiors saw necessary. For example, in 1859, Dease sent Mother Joachim Murray (1829-1896) to take over from fellow Irishwoman Mother Berchmans Lalor, as Superior of the Loreto Convent, Guelph. Finding the convent in financial need, Joachim Murray turned to Teresa Dease for assistance. Dease almost at once wrote to Ireland, to Teresa Ball, saying that she had "lent [Mother Joachim] £100 to satisfy the most troublesome of her creditors," but that this was insufficient to meet the "debt of £200 in Guelph."³¹ Despite the grim economic climate of mid-century Ireland, Teresa Ball managed to respond with financial aid, and Dease wrote at once to thank her for sending "the Bank of Ireland bill for £50... for the pecuniary

²⁹ The first Superiors of the Institute houses in Canada were all Irish women, sent from Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham, as follows – Toronto (1847): Teresa Dease, IBVM; Brantford (1853): Joachim Murray, IBVM; London, Ontario (1855) Berhmans Lalor, IBVM; Guelph (1856): Berchmans Lalor; Belleville (1857): Teresa Dease, IBVM; Niagara Falls (1861): Joachim Murray, IBVM; Hamilton (1865): Stanislaus Hennigan, IBVM; Lindsay (1874): Dosithea Gibney, IBVM; and Stratford (1878): Evangelista O'Sullivan, IBVM. When the Institute made its first foundation in the United States in 1880, its first Superior was also Irish-born, and from Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham: Gonzaga Gallivan, IBVM. Source: Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archives, Canadian Province (IBVMACP).

³⁰ MS letter from Mother Teresa Dease, IBVM (Toronto), to Mother Teresa Ball, IBVM (Dublin), 20 April 1851, TB/CAN/2/2, Loreto Central and Irish Province Archives (hereafter, LCIPA).

³¹ MS letter from Mother Teresa Dease, IBVM (Toronto), to Mother Teresa Ball, IBVM (Dublin), 3 October 1859, TB/CAN/2/15, LCIPA.

embarrassment of our dear Sisters in Guelph,” and extending the “filial gratitude of Mother M. Joachim.”³²

In addition to providing nineteenth-century Irish women like Dease and Ball with the opportunity to develop their leadership abilities, convent life was also sustaining for women, allowing them to gain “control over their personal lives.”³³ No doubt for many young women, an attraction of religious life was that it provided an alternative to marriage and childbirth, allowing them to be financially independent of men while nonetheless bringing status to their families. Somewhat ironically, a woman could escape the drudgery of marriage and the ignominy of spinsterhood, without being denied a wedding day. Perhaps the most dramatic moment that a novice could anticipate was the ceremony of reception, when she would enter the chapel wearing a bridal gown, later to be clothed in the religious habit. And while rules concerning modesty might have indicated otherwise, novices had other moments in the limelight, such as when their departure on ships bound for the missions were reported in the newspapers in laudatory tones. The farewell given to sisters was often dramatic. Sr. Eilis Casey, IJS, recalled her first departure from Drishane Convent, Co. Cork, to teach in Singapore:

We left from Millstreet station, and as the train passed through our [convent] fields all the Sisters and the boarders were up on ditches waving... the driver slowed down... and blew long blasts on the whistle, as we bade our last farewells to Drishane... We were going into the unknown, but our hearts were full of this glorious adventure.³⁴

³² MS letter from Mother Teresa Dease, IBVM (Toronto), to Mother Teresa Ball, IBVM (Dublin), n.d. [c. late 1859], TB/CAN/2/16, LCIPA.

³³ Hoy, “The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women,” 65.

³⁴ Sr. Eilis Casey, IJS, *A Missionary Remembers* (Ireland: IJS, 1999).

The heightened language surrounding the “glorious toil” of missionary life can also be found in novitiate and convent annals. For example, the annals of Drishane Convent recount the visits of many Infant Jesus Sisters, home briefly from the mission field, who doubtless exerted influence on pupils in making the decision to enter the order. For example, the appointment of a new Mistress of Novices at the convent was recorded as follows:

[at] 11 a.m. was announced the arrival of a visitor from Malaya, Mme St. Albert whose return from the missions was expected daily since July. Her trip home was intended only as a holiday after seventeen years of glorious toil in Kuala Lumpur and Klang but on the journey homeward in Paris... the painful sacrifice which awaited her was revealed. Providence had ordained that she was not to return to complete her mission in Malaya but in reward for the faithful years of service there had reserved for her one of His most cherished gifts, that of leading souls directly to Him as Mistress of Novices.³⁵

Another attraction of life in a missionary order was that members could expect to travel to countries that most of their contemporaries would never see. In 1888, readers of the *Irish Catholic* enjoyed a vivid picture of “the White Star Line steamer, *Adriatic*, which sailed from Queenstown...[with] twenty young ladies as first-class passengers, postulants of the Order of St. Joseph, to be located in the city of Massachusetts.”³⁶ The challenge of such travel was rarely lost on Irishwomen who left their homeland by ship, to face the unknown. Many letters and travel accounts survive which demonstrate how acutely sisters observed every stage of their journey.³⁷ For example, in 1847, Mother Ignatia Hutchinson, IBVM,

³⁵ 13 September 1938. *Convent Annals*. IJSGA.

³⁶ “The Catholic Church in America: Recruiting from Tipperary,” *Irish Catholic*, 13 October 1888.

³⁷ Deirdre Raftery, “Into the Swing of the Sea: Nuns and International Travel, 1840-1940” (forthcoming).

wrote from the *Garrick* to Mother Teresa Ball, IBVM, in Dublin, to recount the “long voyage [to Canada] which has taken us 31 days to accomplish.”

Similarly, the difficult voyage of the vessel *La Julie*, which took five Infant Jesus Sisters to Penang in 1851, is recounted in their convent annals. It was a four-month voyage, marked by the death of the Superior, Mother Pauline Rodot, IJS, who was buried at sea near Christmas Island. A year later, the voyage of *SS Benedick* taking another member of the order, Irishwoman Madame St. Gregory Connolly, IJS, to Penang is recorded. The intrepid Gregory Connolly continued her journey by camel.³⁸ Less exotic, though perhaps equally challenging, was the land journey by covered wagon that awaited (Anna) Josephine Shannon when she landed in the United States in 1820. Mother Shannon, RSCJ, recalled the expedition late in her life, when writing her memoirs at the request of her Superior.³⁹ For five months, she and her family traveled “in wagons drawn by oxen... [which] served as vehicles during the day and sleeping quarters at night,” from Baltimore to Cincinnati, and then on to Ohio and St. Louis before settling in Hancock Prairie, just two weeks before her mother gave birth to a son.⁴⁰ Anna, together with her sister, was placed in the Sacred Heart convent at Florissant in 1824, and she entered religious life there in 1826 at the age of sixteen.

While some women were drawn toward missionary life, others may have been impelled toward it by the grim realities of nineteenth-century Ireland. As Jackson (1984) notes, there were few outlets for paid female work in a country reliant on small farming; domestic work and farm labouring were the only options for the majority of women, and “girls of twelve and thirteen years old were hired out with their brothers for domestic service

³⁸ See KilBride and Raftery, *The Voyage Out*, 107.

³⁹ *Vie de la Révérende Mère Anna Josephine Shannon: Religieuse du Sacré Coeur 1810-1896*, trans. C. KilBride, 2012.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

[and] potato picking” at hireling fairs.⁴¹ And perhaps the least explored impetus to consider religious life was the Great Famine, the effects of which ravaged the country in 1845-51.⁴²

As argued below, this had a direct impact on increasing the numbers of Irish women entering teaching orders at home and overseas.

Recruitment to religious life for Irish women: Advertising, recruitment drives, sodalities, and schools

To attract girls to religious life, advertising through the public press was utilized by some orders, though the success of such advertising depended on reaching literate female readers.

Publications such as the *Irish Catholic* regularly carried advertisements inviting young women to consider religious life. For example, a short notice titled “Postulants Wanted” appeared several times in 1907, to attract recruits to the Order of St. Francis.⁴³ The Sisters of Mercy, like many other orders, not only placed advertisements but also arranged for members of their American communities to visit different parts of the country on recruitment drives.

The *Irish Catholic* carried a notice every week from June until mid-September 1912 stating:

Two Sisters of Mercy from the Diocese of Tucson, USA, are in Ireland in quest of subjects for the Foreign Mission. Any young girl feeling a call to the Religious Life, and wishing to serve God in the schools or hospitals of the Order will please communicate with Sister

⁴¹ Pauline Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” *International Migration Review* 18 (1984), 1014.

⁴² By 1854, it is estimated that between 1.5 and 2 million people had emigrated from Ireland, and between 1.1 and 1.15 million people died from starvation or disease from 1846 to 1851.

⁴³ *Irish Catholic*, 4 May 1907. The advertisement invited young ladies to correspond with Sr. M. Philomena, at Gardiner’s Place, Dublin.

M. Baptist Gavagan, Convent of Mercy, Newtownforbes, Co.
Longford.⁴⁴

Similarly, two “Dominican Sisters from Texas” announced via the public press that they would “arrive in Ireland on June 8th, and visit different places there in the interest of interviewing and accepting subjects for their novitiate in Houston.”⁴⁵

The success of such recruitment drives was a significant boon to overseas missions, and the practice of sending Irish nuns “home” to do the recruiting in Ireland was a clever strategy. In 1898, following a visit to Ireland by Sr. Mary Paul McHenry, the *Cork Examiner* reported:

On Saturday last, fifty-seven young lady postulants, intended for convent life, left Queenstown for Philadelphia... where they will then proceed to St. Louis and there join the Order of St. Joseph... Their average age is from 16 to 20... young people of whom the country might feel justly proud...⁴⁶

It was equally important to position Irish nuns strategically in new schools, which were fertile grounds for vocations. For example, when the Infant Jesus Sisters decided to make their first Irish foundation in Co. Cork in 1909, they carefully chose Madame St. Beatrice Foley, IJS, a Cork woman who had entered the order in France before being sent to Singapore. In 1909, she was brought back from Singapore, to be part of the founding group going from the Paris motherhouse to make the foundation at Drishane Castle.

⁴⁴ *Irish Catholic*, 8 June 1912, and weekly until 14 September 1912. See Hoy Papers, IGC Loyola, Series 2, Box 3.

⁴⁵ *Irish Catholic*, 9 June 1928. See Hoy Papers, IGC Loyola, Series 2, Box 3.

⁴⁶ “Irish Postulants for American Convents.”

Foley was an astute choice for many reasons. She had family in the locality, and her brother-in-law Cornelius Duggan helped to find the best location for the new convent, while her sister Nora Duggan prepared the building for the arrival of the first Sisters. Foley also had the advantage of being able to speak Irish and English, and she understood the ways of the Irish people, unlike the first Superior of Drishane, Mother Claire Bringeon, IJS, who was a Frenchwoman. Finally, Foley also had the advantage of experience of the missions, as she had spent sixteen years at the Infant Jesus convent in Singapore. Within months, a novitiate was set up and Beatrice Foley was made first Mistress of Novices. Her influence on novices at Drishane was considerable, and it was commented that she never lost an opportunity to talk about mission life in Singapore. Indeed, the first vocation at Drishane was Foley's niece, Patricia Walsh, who entered the novitiate in 1914 at the age of seventeen. She made her first profession in 1916 and was sent to Japan, continuing a family tradition and commencing a Drishane tradition of supplying local women for the international mission field.

Vocation and/or emigration: Choices for Irish women

When Beatrice Foley entered religious life in 1889, she was just one of thousands of Irish women to whom convent life offered a role, whether or not they were educated. Only a very small minority of women had formal schooling prior to the establishment of the National System of education in 1831, and most of those who attained a "superior" or second-level education were Protestant girls educated by governesses or at English boarding schools.⁴⁷ A smaller number of Catholic girls went overseas to be educated at convents. For example, Frances Ball was sent at the age of nine to the Bar Convent in York, to be educated by the

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the different forms of provision for girls, see Deirdre Raftery and Susan M. Parkes, *Female Education in Ireland, 1700-1900: Minerva or Madonna?* (Ontario and Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She would later enter the Institute, and return to Ireland to make their first overseas foundation at Rathfarnham Abbey, Dublin.

The majority, unlike Ball, relied on the National System of education to provide non-denominational schooling for boys and girls. Its earliest years were contemporary with periods of famine, disease, death, and mass emigration. Unsurprisingly, by the time the system was reviewed by the Powis Commission (1870), it was found to have many shortcomings, with the majority of children leaving school early and with minimal literacy skills (reading and writing).⁴⁸ However, because National schooling was conducted through the English language, it doubtless improved the prospects of all those who emigrated to America, Britain, and Australia. Reforms in the National System, introduced following the *Reports* of the Powis Commission, had a marked impact on increasing literacy by the end of the century, so that almost every girl who either emigrated or entered religious life in the period 1880-1900 was likely to be able to both read and write.

Fitzpatrick (1990) calculates that over three million Irishwomen left Ireland in the nineteenth century, noting that “[m]ore than half of the female generation which reached adolescence about the time of the famine subsequently emigrated.”⁴⁹ In the second half of the nineteenth century, about half of each generation of Irish women emigrated. Marginally better educated than Irish men at that time, some of them had been encouraged to emigrate by their teachers in evening classes and National Schools,⁵⁰ while others availed of the help of “female emigration societies” and public funding, such as Vere Foster’s “Irish Female

⁴⁸ *Report of the commissioners appointed to enquire into the nature and extent of the instruction afforded by the several institutions in Ireland for the purpose of elementary or primary education; also the practical working of the system of national education in Ireland*, 1870 (Powis Commission).

⁴⁹ David Fitzpatrick, “‘A Share of the Honeycomb’: Education, Emigration and Irishwomen,” in Mary Daly and David Dickson, *Language, Change and Educational Development, 1700-1920* (Dublin: Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin, 1990), 173.

⁵⁰ Fitzpatrick notes that “Crash courses for emigrants were... encouraged by State agencies,” and that “many National teachers were or had been emigration agents.” See “‘A Share of the Honeycomb,’” 176-78.

Emigration Fund.”⁵¹ Of interest here are Irish women who emigrated and subsequently became nuns. Some of them had lives that were remarkable by any standards, while most had lives that greatly differed from those of the women who stayed behind.

As Coburn and Smith (1996) have argued, “women religious were among the most publicly active of late nineteenth and early twentieth century women... women from working class and middleclass backgrounds, regardless of ethnic group, could advance in teaching, nursing, administration and... leadership.”⁵² While religious life very much involved living by rules, it could be liberating for some Irish women. Irish emigrants to the United States were perceived as ethnically and socially inferior to many other European emigrants, and poor women of all ethnic groups were particularly vulnerable.⁵³ However, research shows that religious life could offer poor Irish women security, shelter, and community life, and some of these women obtained education and opportunities that they could not have expected as seculars.

As noted earlier, over half of all Irish women to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart in the period 1831-1900 did so in the United States, having first emigrated from Ireland. Many of these women postponed entering religious life until they had first sent money home to Ireland to support their families, or sent “passage money” to bring family members out to the United States. Having fulfilled these responsibilities, they then made the decision to leave secular life and enter religion. For example, Catherine Dougherty, who was born in Co. Donegal in 1832, went to the United States at the age of seventeen to work in domestic

⁵¹ “Mr. Vere Foster’s Irish Female Emigration Fund: Under the Auspices of All the Clergy of All Denominations in the West of Ireland,” National Library of Ireland (hereafter, NLI), MS 13,552.

⁵² Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, “Creating Community and Identity: Exploring Religious and Gender Ideology in the Lives of American Women Religious, 1836-1920,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 14, no. 1 (1996), 104.

⁵³ For a discussion of the hostile reception Irish people encountered in the United States, and attitudes toward Catholic immigrants, see Charles Hirschman, “The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States,” *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004), 1206-33.

service. “She saved as much as she could for her poor [widowed] mother and succeeded in paying the passage of her young brothers and sisters,” before entering the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1858.⁵⁴ Her decision to become a religious ensured that she had a home for the rest of her life, although as a Coadjutice (lay Sister) her work continued to be domestic labour, and she is recorded as having “[i]roned caps for forty years.”⁵⁵

Mary Fitzpatrick, who “was born in Ireland of poor parents” in 1821, also “left Ireland for America where she worked as a domestic” in order to send money home to her family.⁵⁶ In 1860, she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in New York at almost forty years of age. The Society did not accept women over the age of thirty, so when Mother Hardey asked her age she is reported to have said “thirty years and a wee bit.”⁵⁷ Mary Fitzpatrick exchanged secular life for the security of religious life, while continuing to work hard: “[s]he was to be seen in winter, during the worst frosts, digging out the snow and bringing in the coal. She worked as a cook for most of her life.”⁵⁸ Equally industrious was Elizabeth Fitsimmons, who had been born in Co. Westmeath in 1840. Having emigrated with her entire family, she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1862, and subsequently “made shoes for the community and often replaced the carpenter, the painter and even the plumber.”⁵⁹

Irish emigrants from educated families often attained positions of leadership in religious life.⁶⁰ Anna Shannon, noted above, whose family emigrated to the United States in 1820, was educated firstly in Ireland and then at the Sacred Heart convent at Florissant,

⁵⁴ Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Lettres Annuelles 1906-1908*, Vol. 3, 34-35, trans. Society of the Sacred Heart Archives Dublin (hereafter, SSHAD).

⁵⁵ Biographical Index, SSHAD.

⁵⁶ Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Lettres Annuelles 1900-1902*, Vol. 3, 168-169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Lettres Annuelles 1906-1908*, Vol. 3, 81-82. SSHAD.

⁶⁰ Women religious and leadership is discussed in Deirdre Raftery, “Rebels, Rulers and Reformers in Nineteenth-century Convent Schools: Examining the Experience of Women in International Education,” *History of Education* (forthcoming).

where she entered religious life. At Florissant, she lived with and worked beside Mother Philippine Duchesne, who had brought the Society of the Sacred Heart to the United States. Duchesne spoke only French, and Shannon's proficiency in both French and English was of great use to her Superior, who viewed Shannon as central to the success of the school. In time, responsibilities were given to Shannon, including becoming Vice Vicar of Louisiana. Shannon made a foundation at St. Joseph, Missouri, and was Superior and Mistress General at Grand Coteau. She was also Superior at St. Michel, and was given the responsibility of making a foundation at New Orleans in 1867. Throughout her life, she worked alongside many Irish Coadjutrices, and is recorded as having shown unusual interest in the domestic work of these Sisters. It is possible that her shared national identity influenced her concern with their work.⁶¹

Irish identity: Lay Sisters and Choir Sisters⁶²

While nuns born in nineteenth-century Ireland were British subjects, ambiguities often surrounded their national identities. Evidence indicates that Irish-born choir sisters were less likely to be perceived as *ethnically* Irish than Irish-born lay sisters, whose "Irishness" was a defining characteristic. Those in the former group were usually members of the Catholic upper-middle class and – by virtue of their education, social *milieu*, and strong connections within British society – blended easily into European and American convent life, where they

⁶¹ *Vie de la Révérende Mère Anna Josephine Shannon* [trans.], 81; and database of Irish members of the Society of the Sacred Heart, compiled by this researcher.

⁶² In the religious orders discussed in this article, choir Sisters were usually destined for teaching, while lay Sisters carried out the domestic work of the convents. The two-tiered system of membership in teaching orders is discussed in Christine Trimmingham Jack, "The Lay Sister in Educational History and Memory," *History of Education* 29, no. 3 (2000). Many orders used the term "lay sister," though some used the terms "House Sister," "Converse Sisters," and "Coadjutice." Lay Sisters in the Society of the Sacred Heart were called "Coadjutrix"/ "Coadjutrice," and the latter is the term adopted in this article where appropriate.

sounded and looked very much like choir nuns born in England.⁶³ Many, if not most, would have identified themselves as “British,” though – like the aforementioned Fanny Cronin, RSCJ – they could equally have passed as religious “without nation.”

Irish-born lay sisters were invariably daughters of small shopkeepers, tenant farmers, and the labouring poor. Few lay sisters brought financial dowries when they entered convents, and it was viewed that they brought instead a “dowry of virtue.”⁶⁴ Where nineteenth-century entrance records exist, they indicate that many lay sisters received little formal education prior to entering religious life. There is little to indicate that they were identified, by themselves or others, as anything other than “Irish,” as will be seen below.

It is not known what proportion of Irish women religious in the international mission field were lay sisters or choir sisters, or what proportion of all lay and choir religious were Irish. However, based on analysis of data available, it is probable that in convents in cities in the United States, in which there were large influxes of Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century, Irish women who entered *after* emigrating from Ireland at that time were more likely to have been lay sisters than choir sisters. Data indicates that 503 Irish-born women entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in the United States, in the period 1831-1900; 350 of these women were recorded as Coadjutrices.⁶⁵ In the post-Famine period of 1851-1870, 287 Irish women immigrants entered the Society, of whom 199 were Coadjutrices.⁶⁶ While biographical details of these women are slender, they indicate that most of them had left Ireland to go into domestic service in cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston.

⁶³ For a sample of such women see Raftery, “Rebels, Rulers and Reformers,” which notes the biographical details of nuns such as Frances Ball, whose father was a prosperous silk merchant, while her mother’s family was the Eyrecourt estate in Galway. Teresa and her sisters were educated at the Bar Convent, York, while her brothers attended Stonyhurst.

⁶⁴ Janet Erskine Stuart, *The Society of the Sacred Heart* (Roehampton: Convent of the Sacred Heart, 1923), 26-27; and Trimmingham Jack, “The Lay Sister,” 185.

⁶⁵ Extrapolated from this researcher’s database on nineteenth-century Irish nuns.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Obituaries of lay sisters are, unsurprisingly, fewer in number and shorter in length than those of choir sisters. Where they exist, they tend to comment on characteristics such as piety and good humour, as it was rarely possible to enumerate examples of achievements and leadership that were to be found in the obituaries of choir sisters. It is nonetheless illuminating to compare existing accounts of the lives of Irish lay and choir sisters, to see the degree to which their “Irishness” is evident. Where sources on the lives of Irish lay sisters exist, they indicate that their contemporaries often considered them to have a particularly Irish sensibility.

Nine of the eleven documentary accounts of the life of Helen McAloon, RSCJ, refer to her Irish identity.⁶⁷ Born in 1881, Helen McAloon emigrated to the USA and entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in St. Louis in 1905. Reflections on her life make reference to her “distinctive Irish brogue,” her “Irish smile and her Irish welcome,” her “open smile and her Irish brogue,” her “simple, wholesome Irish faith,” her “Irish wit and delightful brogue,” her “deep Irish faith,” and her “fascination for her beloved Ireland.” Two contemporaries comment on Sr. Helen’s “Irish determination”; there are also references to the “sparkle in her Irish eye,” to her “Irish and religious joy and gaiety,” and to the way in which she faced death in a “typically Irish fashion.”⁶⁸ In a similar vein, the life of Mary Anne Roarty, RSCJ, a Coadjutrice who had been born in 1884, was recorded in the notes for her “circular” in 1966 with references to her Irishness, even though she had been in America

⁶⁷ Born in Co. Fermanagh, Helen McAloon and three of her siblings emigrated to America. Helen worked in a shoe factory before deciding to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart. Personal File, National Archives, Society of the Sacred Heart, Canadian and United States Provinces, St. Louis, Missouri (hereafter, NASSHCUSP). While detailed records of Lay Sisters are scant, in some instances the death of a Sister resulted in reflections and letters of sympathy being written; where these have survived, they are useful sources.

⁶⁸ Personal Files, NASSHCUSP.

since 1903. Sr. Mary Anne had an “Irish wit and good humour,” a “strong Irish faith,” and she was noted for her “warm Irish welcome.”⁶⁹

Sometimes the piety of Irish lay sisters was identified as remarkable. Recording the life of Ellen Finn, RSCJ, a Coadjutrice in Manhattan, the annual circular of the Society said: “If we had not known her place of birth we could have guessed it by the strength of her faith.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Ellen Donnelly, RSCJ, who had emigrated from Tyrone in the 1880s to go into service, having been sent her passage money by her brother, was described as having “a lively and strong faith, as one is used to hearing of the Irish.”⁷¹

Obituaries and biographical records of choir sisters are more plentiful. Those who held prominent positions as headmistresses or Superiors were often remembered in newspaper articles, and in some archives there can be found recollections of nuns written, at the request of Superiors and archivists, by community members who knew them.⁷² Unlike the short accounts of the lives of lay sisters, biographical accounts of choir sisters were sometimes published as books or book chapters.⁷³ Those that recount the lives of nineteenth-century Irish choir sisters are restrained in tone, and rarely comment on personal characteristics such as accent and humour.

For example, Xavier Murphy, RSCJ, Superior at the Sacred Heart Convent at Grand Coteau in 1825, was referred to simply as “an Irish nun sent from Paris,”⁷⁴ while her

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Lettres Annuelles 1906-1908*, 19. SSHAD.

⁷¹ Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Lettres Annuelles 1924-1926*, 162. SSHAD.

⁷² There is evidence that in the decades that followed Vatican II, Superiors paid increasing attention to the maintenance of archives, and called for memoirs and reflections to supplement existing official records of the lives of community members.

⁷³ Written by women religious or by secular writers, these publications include William Hutch, *Nano Nagle: Her Life, Her Labours and their Fruits* (Dublin: McGlashen and Gill, 1875); *The Life and Work of Mary Aikenhead*, by a Member of the Congregation (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1924); and Margaret Gibbons, *The Life of Margaret Aylward* (London: Sands and Co., 1928).

⁷⁴ Bessie R. Belloc, *Historic Nuns* (London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow: Sands and Co., 1911), 163.

contemporary, Mary Ann O'Connor, RSCJ, was "an Irish nun, who could speak both English and French."⁷⁵ With similar restraint Mother Teresa Ball, IBVM, described Mother Teresa Dease, IBVM, as "a person of superior mind and distinguished piety,"⁷⁶ and all of the extant early accounts of Dease, who played a huge role in the expansion of the Institute in Canada, refer to her "illustrious lineage" which included "the most distinguished families in the counties of Westmeath, Longford and Cavan."⁷⁷

Generally however, the attribution of "Irishness" is less evident in records concerning the lives of Irish-born choir sisters. For example, while Anna Shannon, RSCJ, is recorded as having nursed a favourite Coadjutrice until the time of her death, the death scene includes reference to the Irish identity of the lay Sister, without ever noting that the two women have a shared nationality: "Reverend Mother Shannon never left her poor invalid and did not take a moment's rest, exhorting her, encouraging her... The Irish faith of the poor dying Sister took great comfort from the support."⁷⁸

Conclusion

In nineteenth-century Ireland, there were many attractions to life as a missionary nun in a teaching order. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the challenges and satisfactions that nuns experienced as teachers, it is possible to demonstrate that the recruitment of Irish women religious for teaching orders was both strategic and effective. While it remains to calculate the numbers of Irish lay and choir sisters in missionary orders, it is possible to develop some understanding of their motivations to enter religious life.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 171.

⁷⁶ Mother Teresa Ball to Bishop de Charbonnel, 1850, cited in *Life and Letters of Rev. Mother Teresa Dease*, by a Member of the Community (Canada: McClelland and Co., 1916), 59.

⁷⁷ *Life and Letters of Rev. Mother Teresa Dease*, 17-18.

⁷⁸ *Vie de la Révérende Mère Anna Josephine Shannon* [trans.], 82.

In the period under review in this article, Irish nuns went overseas with no expectation of returning home, unless it was required of them by their Superior General. While some were impelled by a “call” to spread Christianity, it is arguable that others entered religious life because it presented economic stability, companionship, and a measure of security. During and after the years of the Great Famine, many Irish women emigrated to the New World to work as domestic servants and send remittances to Ireland to support their families, before eventually entering a convent as a lay sister. While little is known about these women, their narrative merits attention not only for what it reveals about female emigration and the lives of some of the Irish diaspora, but also for the light it throws on the agency of Irish working class women in the nineteenth century.

Irish women also became choir sisters in missionary orders in the nineteenth century. Many of them rose to positions of great responsibility, and arguably had opportunities that would not have been afforded them at home, or in secular life. Unlike lay sisters, whose Irish identities are often noted by contemporaries, Irish choir sisters almost transcended any form of national identity: they were not obviously either Irish or Anglo-Irish.⁷⁹ In part, this may have been due to the absence of typical signifiers such as national language or regional accents; it may also have been because their superior education – and particularly their competence in French – diluted their Irish identity in front of people who did not expect to find such “European” sophistication in Irish Catholic women. For these women, it is possible that the education they had prior to entering religious life, together with their social background, allowed them something of the cosmopolitan presence to which Fanny Cronin, RSCJ, aspired in Dublin, in 1883, when she wrote, “*Je suis d’aucune Nation.*”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ This term was used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to signify the privileged successors of the Protestant Ascendancy – that is, professional and landed people who were members of the Established Church (later Church of Ireland).

⁸⁰ Fanny Cronin, RSCJ, to Rev. M. Lehon, RSCJ, 20 November 1883, C IV. SSHGA.

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