



# **The Need to Broaden the Research Agenda on Irish Women who Became Female Religious Teachers in Australia, with Particular Reference to the Period up to 1922**

Tom O'Donoghue<sup>†</sup>

*University of Western Australia*

This paper highlights the need for studies to be undertaken on Irish women who became 'female religious' in Roman Catholic religious communities and who taught in Australian schools up until 1922. The paper is structured in three parts. It opens by outlining the international context that gave rise to the existence of these personnel in Australia. The more specific background is then sketched out. A broad overview of the literature on the distinct group of teachers in Australia in question follows and the fact that the current research base on them is somewhat unwieldy and disjointed is highlighted. This contention in turn, it is argued, indicates the need for engagement in a major research programme which takes a macro perspective on Irish female religious as teachers in Australia.

## **The International Context**

While the Catholic Church (the Church) has been involved in education from the early days of Christianity, it was not until a little over two centuries ago that its concern for the schooling of the masses became paramount. This latter development has to be viewed alongside the continual erosion of the Church's temporal empire following the Reformation, the ultimate humiliation being the loss of the Papal States in 1870 (O'Donoghue, 2004). The associated 'fortress Church' mentality resulted in a number of

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<sup>†</sup> Address for correspondence: Professor Tom O'Donoghue, Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia (M428), 35 Stirling Highway, 6009 Perth, Australia. Email: tom.odonoghue@uwa.edu.au.

developments, including the great expansion which took place in Catholic education internationally, particularly during the nineteenth century. Concurrently, there was a rapid growth in both old and new religious teaching orders of nuns, brothers and priests who had a serious commitment to schooling the poorer sectors of Catholic society along with the better-off. This was all part of a massive project on the part of the Church aimed at re-establishing its spiritual power, and this at a time of increasing involvement by the state in direct provision of schooling.

Primary schools in particular played a central role in the Church's educational project. As with the State, the Church sought to use schools to pacify and regulate the 'lower classes'. However, it also insisted on the creation of an all-pervasive religious atmosphere in the schools. This led to the emergence of various levels of tension between the Church and successive governments in various parts of the world. At the same time, the Church largely accepted state-prescribed syllabi in many countries, except where they came into direct conflict with Church dogma. Throughout much of the English-speaking world this allowed Catholic schools to work to promote the social mobility of the children of 'the faithful', thus seeking to break down the link between being Catholic and being poor. Also, in an effort to help maintain the power and status of its better-off brethren, there was a growth in the number of secondary schools run by the Church aimed at providing education for the children of the Catholic upper and middle classes.

In its engagement in this vast project, the Church insisted on the right to organize its own schools, staff them with its own appointees and teach distinctively denominational doctrine, regardless of the country concerned. Also, it insisted that, wherever possible, Catholic parents should send their children to Catholic schools. In the case of Australia, it had reason to be optimistic in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; the general pattern of educational provision by 1850 was a mixture of governmental enterprise, occasional voluntary effort and state assistance to denominational schools. However, financial aid to denominational schools was abolished in each state between 1872 and 1893.

Catholic schools were particularly badly hit by the associated acts (O'Donoghue, 2001) and it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that Catholic education once again began to benefit from even a small amount of government financial assistance. They survived largely because individual Australian bishops were successful in persuading various religious orders from European Catholic countries to send members to establish and staff schools as part of a large unpaid labour force.

The broad concern of this paper is with one of the most prominent groups of contributors to the latter effort right up until the 1960s, namely, those women who came from Ireland to teach as nuns in Australia. The cohort, which was part of a much wider group who went to many parts of the world is, as Akenson (1996, p. 96) has pointed out, in much need of scholarly investigation:

I think the most pressing need is for serious historical research to be done on Irish women...especially from the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815) to the Partition of Ireland (1920). This is the period in which the foundation of the Irish ethnic group worldwide was formed, and yet we know very little about one-half of that pioneer group.

The next part of the paper now sketches out the more specific context to which this contention applies in relation to the period between 1846 and 1922.

### **The More Specific Background**

In the early part of the nineteenth century both lay teachers and clerical teachers alike played a prominent part in the provision of Catholic education in Australia. The withdrawal of financial assistance to Catholic schools in the latter half of the century, however, meant that lay teachers were no longer a viable option and so members of religious teaching orders from Europe were sought. The first major surge in the growth of the orders in the country was in the 1880s. Irish priests, brothers and nuns constituted one group who made this possible because of a surplus of personnel relative to needs at home (Fogarty, 1959). They were

accompanied by continental-based orders, French in particular, who were both motivated by the great new international missionary movement within the Church, and in search of locations like Australia where they could work free from the sort of religious persecution they were experiencing at home. A second surge came in the early 1900s as the initial orders, which by now were well established, expanded the number of their convents, monasteries and houses around the country, and became prominent in schools, in orphanages, and in care of the sick and aged.

Of the three groups referred to collectively as 'religious', namely, priests, brothers and nuns, it was the latter who had by far the greatest presence numerically (Fogarty, 1959). For example, of the 3491 members of religious orders teaching in schools in Australia in 1900, 3059 were nuns while only 379 were brothers and 53 were priests. Fifty years later, in 1950, this ratio remained largely the same, with 11245 of the 12901 Catholic teachers who were members of religious orders being nuns, while only 1532 were brothers and only 124 were priests. Overall, then, nuns constituted the most visible group of teachers in Catholic schools in Australia, particularly in primary schools where, in the main, they taught both boys and girls. Since the majority of Catholic children, like the great majority of Australian children generally, did not proceed to secondary schooling, this meant that the majority of Catholic Australians, both male and female, who attended Catholic schools, received most of their education from religious who were not just members of religious orders, but also happened to be nuns.

From about the mid 1880s to the mid 1950s, Catholic schooling, like government schooling, sought to keep pace with population growth. The outcome was both consolidation and expansion in an effort to provide a Catholic education for as many Catholic children as possible. The general pattern was one of around 17 per cent of all school-age pupils in the country being in Catholic schools (Fogarty, 1959). Here, education was provided almost totally by religious orders. By 1950, there were 44 orders in the

*The Need to Broaden the Research Agenda on Irish Women*

country involved in teaching: 27 of nuns, eight of religious brothers and nine of priests. While the great majority of these orders originated overseas, six were uniquely Australian foundations.

The ratio of primary to secondary school pupils in Catholic schools largely reflected the situation in government schools, reaching a ratio of two-to-one at the end of the 1960s. Catholic secondary schools in the cities and larger towns were single sex institutions, with boys' schools being staffed almost totally by priests or brothers, and girls' schools being staffed by nuns. In some cases primary schools were co-educational until the last two-to-three years, when boys' transferred from a school run by nuns to one run by brothers or priests. By contrast, the rural areas were dotted with small two- and three-teacher co-educational primary schools, usually staffed by nuns only.

Through these various patterns of provision the nuns were major players in the Church's effort in Australia by the end of the nineteenth century, and throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century, of breaking down the link between being Catholic and being working class. During much of this period sectarianism was widespread, with many businesses adopting a 'no Catholic need apply' position. The Church's response was to aim at elevating the status of Catholics in Australian society so that the status of the Church itself would, in turn, be elevated. Education played a major part in the associated strategy, eventually contributing to the development of a mind-set which gave Catholics a sense of purpose and identity of which they could be proud. Offering the state-prescribed syllabus for secular subjects in Catholic schools, the successes of Catholics in public examinations contributed to a steady move up the social ladder; by 1947 even though Catholics were still under-represented in business and higher education, they had moved solidly into the public service and the professions, and were no longer poorer than other denominations.

Within the body of nuns who were teachers in Australia and who were contributing to this project of social advancement was a very

large Irish presence. A survey of religious personnel by McGinley (2002) calculated that over the course of one hundred years around 2000 Irish girls had come to Australia to join religious orders and nearly 1500 of them were still at work, or in convents throughout the country, in 1976. There had been a shift between 1910 and 1940 such that the majority of nuns in Australia became predominantly Australian-born, but more often than not their parents were first or second generation Irish. Also, further recruitment drives in Ireland by a number of congregations right through to the 1960s continued to be successful, thus ensuring the continuation of a strong Irish presence in the schools.

Irish nuns, then, constituted a major influence on the education of Australian Catholics right up to the early 1970s. Not only were they a significant component of the Catholic teaching force, they also played a major part in decision-making processes regarding education; McGinley (2002), for example, has noted that a number of female religious orders, despite their majority Australian-born membership, continued up to the 1940s, to return Irish women as their major superiors. The associated very strong Irish presence in the Catholic schools was seen as being most appropriate since, from the early years, most of the pupils were of Irish descent. During the early convict period the Irish constituted about one-quarter of the entire population of Australia (Akenson, 1996). The real surge in Irish migration came during the Australian gold rush of the early 1850s when an estimated 84,000 arrived. Around four-fifths of this number stayed on to become permanent settlers. From the 1880s onwards the proportion of Irish-born in Australia, both as a percentage of foreign born and of the total population of the country, began to decline. Yet the extent of the early Irish migration ensured that the Irish continued to be a very significant ethnic minority well into the twentieth century; as late as 1978, for example, 17.9 per cent of the Australian population claimed Irish as their ethnic background (Akenson, 1996).

Given this situation, it is not surprising that from about the middle of the 1850s Australian Catholicism was seen as being synonymous with Irish Catholicism. Also, the very large presence

of Irish nuns in the classroom played a major part in the maintenance of the Irish version of Catholicism amongst the faithful, one which has been described as being clerical, authoritarian and non-intellectual (O'Farrell, 1993). Focusing specifically on the authoritarian dimension, Campion (1978, p. 11) has summarized the situation as follows:

Irish religion in Australia was a religion of law. There were laws about everything: laws about Lenten observance and laws about receiving Communion at Eastertime; laws about who could wash the altar linen and who could not; laws forbidding priests to stay out late at night; laws forbidding them to frequent theatres or racecourses or prize fights; laws forbidding them to join political parties, or read un-Catholic papers, or become guardians or tutors; and, of course, laws ordering what they must wear. It was a system of law and obedience was a prime virtue.

Along with promoting this outlook, the nuns played their part alongside the clergy, religious brothers and pious lay people in promoting various religious practices and assisting in the raising of funds to construct churches and cathedrals.

Nuns, then, especially the very large Irish cohort, played a major part through their work in the schools, in ensuring that Irish Catholicism remained the dominant model of Catholicism in Australia for well over one hundred years. They were reinforced in this action by the fact that for the greater part of this time the Irish Catholic Hierarchy was able to influence the choice of bishops for Australia and ensure that the vast majority of them were Irish (O'Farrell, 1993). Also, Irish priests, continued to dominate the diocesan clergy. These diocesan priests promoted a view of themselves and their Church as a great bastion in the face of an error-ridden, hostile world. Certainly, immigration during the period 1921-33 led to an increase in European Catholics in the country and this influence expanded greatly after World War Two when large numbers of Polish, Italian and Yugoslavian Catholic emigrants arrived. However, while they brought distinct and diverse religious traditions with them, the reaction of the institutional Church was "a policy of spiritual assimilation".

Another way in which the very large presence of Irish nuns in the classroom was influential was in their promotion of a notion that Ireland, rather than Britain, was the 'mother country' of Australian Catholics. They organised the celebration of the feast days of prominent Irish saints, displayed Irish nationalist and religious icons in their classrooms, taught their pupils Irish dances and songs, and regularly mentioned incidents from Irish history in their teaching. The dominant attitude contributed to what O'Farrell (1969, p. 158) has characterized as "a kind of residual disposition to acknowledge Irish origins and to feel most at home with things and people of Irish derivation". At the same time, the Irish Civil War largely brought an end to anti-English feeling in Australia, with the great majority judging that the degree of independence granted to Ireland was just and fair. Thus, by the 1940s Catholics in Australia were quite clear that they were not Irish, but rather were of Irish Catholic descent.

The very prominent part which Irish nuns played in the education of this ethnic group right up to the early 1970s is one which is recognised in Australia and overseas, not only by the Catholic population, but also amongst the wider academic community. However, as pointed out at the beginning of this paper, they also constitute a group about whom much more needs to be revealed. The next section now demonstrates this through a brief review of the existing literature on the matter.

### **The Broad Overview of Related Literature**

In terms of the current state of the literature internationally in relation to the main focus of interest, considerations in this paper can be located at the point of overlap between two main bodies of historical scholarship, namely, research on the history of female religious orders and research on the history of teachers' lives. Regarding the former, the international scholarship on the role played by women religious in social, educational and intellectual history has grown substantially, particularly over the last fifteen years. McNamara's (1996) work, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millenia*, which argues powerfully that the



experience of women religious is one of struggle to gain power and recognition for their contributions, has been particularly significant in relation to the US. Also significant has been Wittberg's (1994) *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*, which analyses the impact of women religious on the history of the US. A rich body of research along similar lines has emerged in relation to Quebec, stimulated largely by Danylewycz' (1987) outstanding contribution, *Taking the Veil*, while in English Canada a complementary body of scholarship, particularly influenced by the work of Smyth (1999), has appeared. A continuing body of similar literature emerged in Ireland and England, including Clear's (1988) *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, Peckham Magray's *The Transforming Power of Nuns: Women*, and Walsh's (2001) *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales 1800-1937*.

Early works on the history of Catholic women religious in Australia were primarily private publications on the history of the founders of religious orders and their establishments. These works were largely ignored by historians at their conferences and in their refereed journals. While they represented a useful balance within Church history which traditionally was patriarchal and clergy-centred, and which tended to be developed from diocesan rather than convent archives, they were usually written by insiders. Consequently, they tended to be highly celebratory, often with the purpose of passing on the fundamental tradition and ideals of the orders.

The mid 1980s was a turning point with the emergence of a number of scholarly works on the history of Catholic women religious. Within another decade synoptic works based on research undertaken in the interim began to appear. In 1997 the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences organized a conference entitled 'Standing against the stream: Women, religion and social action'. Then in 2002, the first history of all the religious orders of women in the nation was published, outlining their origins, foundation and development within the context of emerging Australian society (McGinley, 2002). Collectively, these developments marked the

commencement of an attempt to incorporate research in this area within the academic mainstream and demonstrate that women religious and their various activities constituted a significant phenomenon in Australian society historically.

Any consideration of the role of female religious teachers in Australia also needs to be located within the context of the growing body of research internationally on the history of teachers. In the US, educational historians became particularly active in such work during the 1980s. The success of this project led Warren (1989) to conclude that schools and classrooms of the past had now become accessible and voice had been given to the reflections and commentary of teachers themselves, the “otherwise ‘unremarkable’ people who delivered school to the nation’s children over the course of two centuries”. Research in this vein continued in the US into the 1990s. As it developed in both quality and extent, however, Silver (1994) argued that, apart from similar work in Canada, the remainder of the English-speaking world was not quite as active. Gardner and Cunningham (1997) later went on to draw attention to the fact that teachers constitute an occupational group about whom, at least in the British context, we know surprisingly little.

Historians in Australia have been a little more productive. Here the focus has tended to be on particular aspects of teachers’ lives. Feminist historians have been major contributors. Associated work has been undertaken on the role that teachers have played historically in the construction of masculinity and femininity. Research on teaching and teacher unionization is equally significant as it provides essential historical perspectives for understanding the pressures under which teachers worked in the past. Further insights are provided by a small body of research which has attempted to portray the economic, social and cultural contexts of teachers’ everyday working environments and by significant biographical works on influential Australian educationalists, including Catholic educationalists.

A small number of studies emerged which investigated various aspects of the lives of female religious teachers in Catholic schools, but for quite a while this was a somewhat neglected area of work. Fogarty's (1959) book which charted the provision of Catholic education in Australia over the period 1806-1950, was enlightened in terms of its general scholarly approach. However, while he devoted separate chapters to girls' schooling and girls' curricula, he engaged in very little analysis of the female religious teachers. Furthermore, the emphases of other historians of Catholic education in the 1960s and 70s was more on issues of state aid, on the direction of Catholic education, and on the production of hagiographic accounts of the origins and growth of Catholic institutions. Exceptions in this regard were the pioneering contributions of Kyle (1989) and Theobald (1996) to the study of female religious in education. Nevertheless, a substantial review of the area concluded that it is only recently that acknowledgement of these women as teachers has been recognized more generally. Amongst the most important works which have helped shift the agenda in this regard are those of Trimmingham Jack (1998) and O'Donoghue (2001). Also, scholars are now turning their attention to the history of the role of women religious in Australia in social work and nursing.

## **Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the development of the research base noted above, it is clear that while research on women religious in Australia is now extensive, it is also, at times unwieldy, given its inclusion in many genres and its use of many disciplines. One way of addressing the situation is to generate a broader framework than has hitherto been offered within which the more specific issues and areas of interest can be located. A useful way to proceed in this regard is to categorise nuns in Australia in terms of their countries of origin and then, adopting a macro perspective, examine each category in relation to the key stages in their lives as nuns: the stage centred on their recruitment, the stage of their preparation as nuns, their lives as fully-professed nuns, and their lives in retirement from full-time work.

Akenson (1996, p. 96) has argued that a first step that should be taken in addressing this situation is as follows:

Before one becomes engaged in the enjoyable aspects of chronicling the Irish diaspora (things such as the heroics of individual migrants, the flash of sectarian riots, the machinations of ambitious politicians) one needs to know where within the big picture the individual story is situated. Numbers are our most accurate adjectives and adverbs, if not the most entertaining.

The first sub-step within this first step, it is arguable, should be the identification of various statistical trends from available statistics in relation to the very first stage of those who became female religious (the recruitment stage) in Ireland knowing that they were destined to travel to Australia. Various related research questions could then be located in relation to such a framework. In this way, a solid foundation could be provided for further research on other stages in the life of Irish female religious in Ireland, on their work, and on their relations with the wider community.

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