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Whatever Happened to the History of the Nun?

By Olwen Hufton
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INTRODUCTION TO
NEW HAYES ROBINSON LECTURE SERIES

by

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Each year in March, a distinguished overseas historian is invited to give a public lecture at Royal Holloway. Past speakers include Lawrence Stone, David Cannadine, Simon Schama, Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Brown, and Linda Colley. The event is organised by the History Department under the terms of a benefaction from the estate of Margaret Hayes-Robinson, who was a much-loved Head of Royal Holloway's History Department (1899-1911) in the days when higher education for women was still being pioneered.

The new series of lectures, inaugurated in 1992, has become a popular occasion in the College's annual timetable. Recent meetings have attracted over 200 friends of the Department. To our pleasure, these include many former students from both Royal Holloway and Bedford Colleges, as well as colleagues from an array of Universities and schools within the London area - and numerous guests from the local community in Egham. The success of the lectures has provided the basis for a new publication series, zestfully inaugurated by Natalie Zemon Davis's *Remaking Impostors: From Martin Guerre to Sommersby* (1997) and continued by Linda Colley's *Shakespeare and the Limits of National Culture* (1999). Details of the series are available from the History Department Postgraduate Secretary, Royal Holloway, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX; please write or telephone on 01784-443311.

Otwen Hufton - a graduate of Royal Holloway - is one of Britain's foremost historians of gender. She has taught at the Universities of Leicester, Reading, Harvard and the European University at Florence, before moving to Merton College, Oxford.

On her travels, she has gained many admirers not only for the breadth of her vision but also for her keen researcher's eye for the telling detail. Those qualities are splendidly illustrated in her Hayes Robinson lecture on the History of the Nun. She discusses evidence of close confinement, as in the extraordinary case of the seventeenth-century nun of Monza who was walled up in her cell for fourteen years (as penalty for bearing three children to a priest) and evidence of determined globe-trotting, as in the case of the Carmelites, the Ursulines, and the Sisters of St. Joseph, who established convent missions across the Americas. There are stories of diversity, dedication, and creativity, as well as sometimes of boredom, impatience and confinement, that collectively enable Otwen Hufton to cast fresh light on an important theme within women's history.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE HISTORY OF THE NUN?

Most historians as they accumulate years also accumulate ideas for books they may never write. Amongst those in the recesses of my own mind is a history of the nun, a fascination which has intensified in recent years when the nun's story has become a veritable growth industry. Writing the Hayes Robinson lecture for 1999, to be delivered in my *alma mater*, amidst so many friends, thus indulged me in the delight of presenting, in abbreviated form and in a sympathetic setting, some of the material which has captured my imagination but remained, as it were, imprisoned while I attended to other imperatives. I now have the satisfaction of knowing that even if I never write the book, I have done something.

Sometime in the 1980s in a *Past and Present* meeting, Eric Hobsbawm pronounced, when a certain article was under consideration, that there could be nothing interesting in the history of the nun. *De gustibus nil disputandum*. The 1980s and 1990s have seen a huge expansion in specialist studies which appropriated the experience, differentiated by time and place, of women in the religious life to reveal a tapestry of amazing richness and diversity. As a result, the nun, used as a generic term very loosely to designate women linked by a set of religious vows under a superior, has come out of the shadows to centre stage.¹ In part, this process has been the result of feminist scholarship anxious to redress the balance of historical concern but this has not been the unique propellant. Family history, welfare and educational history, a new kind of religious history, and perhaps – above all – cultural history and the preoccupation with textual analysis, have all found the nun relevant to their unfolding concerns.²

¹ In Canon Law, only those living under solemn vows are accounted nuns (*moniales*) in the technical sense, those under simple vows being called sisters (*sorores*). In this essay, the distinctions are made in the text but confounded in the title.

² The most recent overview in English is J.A. McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996). For an exhaustive bibliography on Italian nuns, see G. Zarri (ed.), *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo* (Rome, 1996), pp. 406-705; on French women, E. Weaver, 'Women and Religion in Early Modern France: A Bibliographical Essay ...', *Catholic Historical Review*, 67 (1981); and for Spain, J.L. Sanchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (Madrid, 1988).

A personage, whose past was once submerged in a dominant narrative of parental greed which enclosed a daughter against her will, and thus condemned her to a life of boredom and resentment, has been endowed with alternative possibilities. When Hildegard of Bingen entered the music charts and Suor Juana appeared on the postage stamps of Mexico and Mother Teresa of Calcutta touched the consciences of the humanitarian West, history and actuality combined to pose a new set of questions. Just what was the nun's place in the society of her time and what potentiality did convent life offer a woman? For some feminist scholars who were actively searching for female heroes, another question intruded. Was it possible that the book-lined cell, which scholarship had little difficulty in unearthing, might be 'a room of one's own'?

The answer to their question is probably negative or, at least, care should be taken to modify such an approach. The convent cell was a highly mediated space and, according to time and place, was controlled with varying degrees of stringency both from within and without by internal and external hierarchies. Furthermore, the choices made by any potential postulant were conditioned by her family which provided the dowry making possible her entry, and by the form of the institutions themselves in the place and at the time she lived. Between the first Benedictine foundations of the early Middle Ages and the twentieth century, the religious life for women underwent many developments and upheavals. We pass from the great medieval abbesses – like Hilda of Whitby who hosted the great synod bringing Britain into conformity with Rome – of whom most were of aristocratic descent, through the medieval mystics who often embraced forms of the mendicant life, to the *beatas* and *beguines* who lived on the fringes of a regular life, partly in the world, where they performed works of mercy, and partly in community. We must take account of women who, like Caritas Pirkheimer, made an intellectual stand against the changes of the Reformation, or those who resisted the reforming hand of the Council of Trent, which sought to enforce more stringent claustration [enclosure in the convent].

Amongst these women were poetesses, painters and musicians dependent for the perpetuation of their skills on contact with the outside world.

But there were also the great reformers themselves who sought to strengthen and, in their view, to purify the religious life by a greater severance from the outside world and its values, such as Teresa of Avila. Then came the great paradigm shift in the religious life in France which undermined claustration and created groups of women concerned with social outreach: Louise de Marillac's Daughters of Charity, the plethora of nursing, teaching and social welfare orders, who lived under simple vows, often annually renewed and under a general superior and the direction of the bishop, who were the agents of a great social mission. This mission survived the French Revolution and reached out into North America and the developing world. A world of service coexisted with this Christianising mission, and the propagation of the faith was clearly consonant with the transmission of a set of cultural values. Reviewing this chronological span and the differing interpretations of the religious life, we can clearly see that there is no single model nun but an infinite diversity of experience.³ Between private piety and public mission, there lies a complex history.

One noteworthy attribute of the nun's record, in contrast to that of the generality of women, is the abundance of documentation she has left behind. In large part this is a function of literacy, and of the institutional need to maintain records relating to property transactions or in defence of privileges. But it far transcends such mundane considerations. The literary legacy is vast: convent chronicles, hagiography, spiritual letters, private letters embodying the thoughts of individual women, translations, histories, autobiography, travel narratives describing the collision of cultures and views of the 'other' are all found in this legacy.⁴

³ O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her : A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500-1800* (London, 1994), pp. 359, 610-14.

⁴ On Italian chronicles, see L. Sebastiani, 'Cronica e agiografia nei monasteri femminile', in S. Broesch, *Raccolte di vite di santi dal XIII al XVII secolo: strutture, messaggi, funzioni* (Brindisi, 1990), pp. 158-68.

The earliest writings going back to the Middle Ages are convent chronicles which exist very abundantly in Italy and Germany but are perhaps more scattered elsewhere. Such chronicles, kept by a sequence of responsible nuns, represent the collective memory of the convent and record usually the entry date and the death of each nun, sometimes her special contribution to convent life and her personal attributes. Sometimes they include a reference to her monetary worth to the convent at the moment of her death (the amount remaining from her dowry after deductions have been made for funeral expenses). Such records can be best illustrated by example. Thus the chronicle of S.Maria in Montedomini in Florence contains a series of entries as follows:

Yehsus Maria 1650

As the sage said, the living must seek virtue with all their strength, and honour is only achieved on death, as we learn that the virtuous actions of the dead are to be praised. God has called unto Him our Suor Maria Benedetta Buontalenti, on Saturday the 7th May, at 11.30, at the age of 59 after 49 years of the religious life. Having followed the path of virtue with the study of grammar in her youth, a virtue acquired by few women, with the goodness of her life, with her reserve, her assiduity in attending the choir, her exemplary religious observance, she would deserve much praise, but this is neither our task nor the place, because it would require a more eloquent language and much longer time and we would only be able to say what the nuns of this convent already know... We shall only say that in her time on this earth this blessed soul did not hide the talent that God had given her, but instead used it so virtuously that now she has won the embrace of her celestial spouse, Jesus. May he make us worthy of her, and her funeral incurred the following cost ... And after all the above costs the Convent is left with 279 scudi 5 lire 3 soldi. Laus Deo Semper.⁵

Some chronicles are little more than records of financial transactions and the details of convent income and expenditures. Some go further and record historical events which impinged on convent life. But the chronicle is one of

⁵ S. Evangelisti, 'Moral Virtues and Personal Goods: The Double Representation of Female Monastic Identity', in O. Hufton (ed.), *Women in the Religious Life* (Florence, 1996), p. 27.

the more prosaic types of remaining documentation relating to the nun's story. It has perhaps attracted the historian less than have either archives relating to convent irregularities or more creative material.

The archives which deal with convent irregularities are those which arise from enquiries made during episcopal visitations or as a result of cases which the convent itself was obliged to draw to the attention of outside authority, such as women who ran away, or were accused of improper behaviour. Less dramatically, they involved disputes over property which occurred even within convents where the nuns had taken a vow of poverty. Such disputes could be concerned with the transmission of cells which families often furnished for a daughter and which could be handed on to relatives for a limited period, before passing wholly under the direction of the convent. Or, they could relate to the failure of families to hand over the full amount of the dowry (often paid in installments) once the young girl had entered the convent. Widows who entered convents after the death of their husbands generated many problems, which arose either from their reluctance to conform to convent rules, or from attempts to revoke property concessions made when they had decided to enter the institution. Case studies or micro-histories based on litigation or irregularities have generated some lively studies, though they raise problems regarding their typicality.

Judith Brown, for example, in a very thoughtful study of a lesbian nun in sixteenth-century Florence is very careful to stress that the case demonstrates the virtual impossibility of sustaining a same sex relationship in the conditions of the convent and the opprobrium directed towards manifestations of such activity.⁶

The seventeenth-century case of the nun of Monza who engaged in a relationship with a priest and gave birth to three children within her convent – for which she paid with the punishment, meted out by Bishop Federico Borromeo, of being walled up in her cell for fourteen years – became legendary,

⁶ J. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1986).

but no one has ever found another case quite like it.⁷ The demonic possession of the Ursuline sisters at Loudun, in the midst of the witch scares of early modern France, stands out for the abnormality of the event. In short, micro-histories based on case studies from legal records, records of abnormalities, can create an overly sensationalist vision of the early modern convent.

Similarly, the discovery of a painter nun, of a poetess, writer or musician does not automatically convert every convent into a creative space of unlimited opportunities, in a harmonious environment shared by like minds. The record of such creative women enriches our understanding of convent life at a particular time and in a particular place; but it by no means allows us to deal in certainties. In the 1640s, Italy's first recognisably 'feminist' nun made a remarkably astute critique of convent life as she saw and appreciated it from her Benedictine convent in Venice.⁸ Her literary *oeuvre* extended to half-a-dozen or more known works, of which one *Inferno monacale* [*The Convent as Hell*], has only been published in recent times although *Paradiso monacale* and *La semplicità ingannata* [*The Convent as Paradise and Artificial Simplicity*] were published in her lifetime. The message of her works is that the convent is heaven or hell depending on the degree of election of the individual nun. Hell is to feel done down, locked involuntarily into routines one detests, and strangulated by the pettiness around one. Yet for the contemplative who wish to set themselves apart, no life could be better.

La semplicità ingannata is in fact an attack on the family strategy of Italian patrician families who make decisions as to which child and how many they can afford to marry and direct the rest towards the convent. She insists that, as the eldest of a family of five girls and no sons, her fate was sealed from infancy and she was trained to expect nothing better than rough wool on her skin, whilst her youngest sister, the one the family would eventually marry, knew nothing but silk. (In the case of a family composed entirely of girls and which therefore

⁷ U. Colombo (ed.), *Vita e processo di Suor Virginia Maria de Leyva, monaca di Monza* (Milan, 1985).

⁸ F. Medioli, *L'inferno monacale di Arcangela Tarabotti* (Turin, 1990) has an excellent introduction.

would not experience an influx of capital from a son's bride, the custom was to wait until the last moment to part with family funds). Very often families with both sons and daughters made a selection of who should be destined for the convent from the physical condition of the girl in question. Was she good looking and was she likely to withstand the rigours of childbirth? These were the attributes of the potential wife. The frail and the bookish were pushed the way of the convent. These were decisions reflecting Italian or Mediterranean practices where spousal alliances were markers of family honour for which families paid dearly. In Britain, marriage practices were more flexible and, if funds were lacking, prestigious families were prepared to marry their daughters into the yeoman classes.

Tarabotti was clearly not precluded by her convent from contact with the outside world, though such contact may have been predominantly epistolary. She corresponded with members of the Accademia. But she seems to have had difficulty relating to her fellow nuns and felt herself isolated within her community.

St Teresa of Avila saw isolation as a necessity for the truly spiritual nun. Far from positing an institution of resounding harmony, she advanced the notion of the convent as a permanently divided space in which the good nun struggled against the inadequacies of her sisters. And she endorsed a hagiographic tradition in which the holy nun is solitary in the midst of lax defaulters.⁹ The reformed Carmel which she created made considerable demands upon the women who embraced this life. Elisa Sampson has recently illustrated how, when the Carmel was installed in Latin America, and hagiographic and other literary forms were exported from Spain, the trope of the good nun surrounded by lax sisters found noteworthy expression in a particular ethnic context. The good nun, of Spanish purity, divided herself, hagiographically speaking, from her sisters of mixed origin who spiked their boiled cactus leaves with chili and drank thick, sweet chocolate instead of the abstemious watery variety which was the choice of the really devout.¹⁰

⁹ J. Bilinkoff, *The Avila of St Teresa* (Ithaca, 1989).

¹⁰ E.T. Sampson, *Colonial Angels: Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico, 1580-1750* (Austin, Texas, 2000).

We need then to accept that any convent, as institution, is more like the comprehensive school than a homogeneous sisterhood of like minds and that its heterogeneous quality is a point of interest in determining the dynamic of the constituency. Moreover, we need to add this concept of heterogeneity to that of chronological and spatial difference in assessing the quality and form of the religious life. This short essay looks in particular at the varying kinds of religious experience available to, and appropriated by, differing kinds of women in the early modern period: the period in which the Reformation denied the conventual life to women in Protestant lands and where Catholic reform first sought to reform the regular life for women by stringent claustration, but, contingent upon place, progressively modified this line as missionary and social demands became part of new national imperatives.

The papal bull *Circa pastoralis* of 1566 asserted that all professed nuns were to observe strict enclosure whether or not this was laid down in their rule or denied in the traditions of the convent.¹¹ Nuns were to be isolated from the rest of society, kept under lock and key, and made largely invisible to outsiders with whom they were never to have contact – unless through the convent grille which was to be put in place for this purpose.

The measure was largely directed against the Italian family which, having consigned one or more of its daughters to the convent, did not see a religious vocation as a hindrance to frequent contact. Such a consignment was made without too much questioning. Over one third of the daughters of the Milanese aristocracy entered the convent. On the eve of the Council of Trent, 3000 Venetian women had been placed in the religious life and, of these, a proportion may have had little spiritual calling.¹² They had, on the other hand, probably received the bulk of their education in a convent school and were related to many of the women in the convent of their family's choice. Visitors came and went. Family events, such as weddings, passed by the convent so that the aunt or sister could see and bless the bride. Public musical events were held

¹¹ R. Creytens, 'La riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i decreti tridentini', in *Il Concilio di Trento e la riforma tridentina* (Rome, 1965), vol. 1.

¹² V. Hunecke, 'Kindbett oder Kloster: Lebenswege Venezianischer Patrizierinnen im 17 und 18 Jahrhunderts', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 18 (1992), pp. 446-76.

in the convent church. Picnics and parties included the relative in religion and, in some instances, holidays for the nun with her family in the parental home were permitted. Furthermore, the convent grille, if such existed, kept no one out whom the convent wished to admit. Indeed, the economy of the convent and the attraction of new recruits could depend upon the flow of visitors as could the visibility of the nuns themselves in the streets.

Existing on the cusp of the changes imposed by the Council of the Trent was the painter nun, Plautilla Nelli, who enjoys the singular distinction of being one of the two women painters acknowledged by Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* (the other woman he acknowledged was a prostitute). She lived in the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina on the corner of the Via San Gallo in Florence, from which abode she appears to have conducted a considerable business. Vasari, who, it must be admitted, was capable of exaggeration, insists that her pictures hung on the wall of every house in Florence. She appears to have learned her craft while in the convent; and there appears to have been a tradition of painter nuns in the establishment, though Nelli rose to levels of competence and renown which marked her off from the rest. Indeed she may have received some training as a result of the relationship between Santa Caterina and the Dominican house of San Marco, which had housed Fra Angelico whose style, amongst others, she consciously imitated. Nelli was responsible for the embellishment of her own convent by a huge and striking *Last Supper*, which hung in the refectory and covered an entire wall.

Recent work focusing on how this nun managed a painter's life between the convent and the city shows that many contacts existed through the nuns themselves with the important families of the city: that as well as profiting from the artist's work commercially, some paintings may have been used as gifts by the convent and some may also have been purchased as gifts by visitors to the convent. Certainly, Nelli negotiated the costs of the paintings herself and the purchase of paint and canvass. The convent account books show that in five

years she earned 890 *scudi* for the convent after her costs of production had been deducted; and the same records show that there was indeed some kind of painting workshop in the convent.¹³

When the bishop's *visitatore* arrived to insist that claustration be enforced and grilles more effectively erected, the Prioress told him that the understanding of the nuns when they entered the convent had been that they would be free to enter and leave, and that they not only had never had claustration but did not want it. She made it clear that the attraction of Santa Caterina to the Florentine community, from whom recruits came, was its openness. She protested in vain. The grilles went up: people could no longer get into the convent from outside, which severely jeopardised the painting business and, although a workshop of kinds persisted, it progressively became something rather different, dealing in bulk orders of terracotta figurines, angels and saints. Interestingly, the account books of Santa Caterina reveal not merely a reduction in income as a result of the loss of specialised art work but also that the food budget of the convent became much higher when fewer nuns ate outside or fewer visitors brought food into the convent.

Art was not the only activity threatened by the new imposition of strictures. Some of the convents of Bologna had enjoyed a reputation for musical performances of the highest order. The best musicians had used outside (lay) teachers and some convents kept stocks of musical instruments which were used by visiting participants – like trombones. C. Monson and R.L. Kendrick have traced the experiences of two convents which included some very specialist musicians. These convents circumvented something of the strictures, limiting the access of the nuns to performances by outside musicians, by installing screens at the back of the church which could be opened to permit the nuns to view discreetly and, yet more importantly, to hear lay musicians performing in their church.¹⁴

¹³ See the essays by S. Evangelisti, C. Murphy and C. Turrill in J. Nelson and M. Fantoni (eds), *Plautilla Nelli: A Painter Nun in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Georgetown, 2000).

¹⁴ C.A. Monson, 'The Making of Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana's *Componimenti Musicale* (1623)' and R.L. Kendrick, 'Four Views of Milanese Nuns' Music', in A. Matter and J. Coakley (eds), *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia, 1994), pp. 297-343.

Elisa Weaver has followed the fortunes of a Florentine nun playwright whose manuscripts continued to reach an audience and gained her election to the Accademia (*in absentia*).¹⁵ Indeed it is possible that the new austerity after Trent (at least where the full rigour of change was actively promoted by bishops) may have made writing the most easy activity for a nun to pursue, since it entailed a private activity conducted in her cell. Outside distribution, however, might depend on the permission of the abbess or the superior. Of all such activity, whether artistic, musical or literary, the subject matter was, even before Trent, sacred rather than profane.¹⁶

The nuns of the convent of Santa Felice in Naborre in Bologna described their dismay and perception of the injustices arising from strict claustration:

*The nuns ... express to your Holiness with all humility their miseries and misfortunes that, notwithstanding that most of them were shut up in this place by their relatives against their wills, for all that they have borne it with considerable patience, and during a time in which they have been so tormented with various statutes and orders that they no longer have the strength to endure it ... Now most recently, besides having removed the organ from here, the doctor has been denied them, so that no body except their father and mother can see and speak with them. Their old servants who were accustomed to serve them in the convent cannot speak to any nun ... Wherefore we fear that, being deprived with such strictness and abandoned by everyone, we have only hell, in this world and the next.*¹⁷

¹⁵ E. Weaver, 'Suor Clemente Ruoti, Playwright and Academician', in *ibid.*, pp. 281-96. See also *idem*, 'Spiritual Fun: A Study of Sixteenth-Century Convent Theatre', in M.B. Rose (ed.), *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives* (Syracuse, 1985), pp. 173-205.

¹⁶ On literary nuns, see the pioneering essay by M.L. King, 'Book-lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance', in P. Labalme (ed.), *Beyond their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (London, 1984).

¹⁷ Archivio Segreto Vaticana, Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari (1586).

The austere hand of Trent, however, did not destroy the aristocratic and dynastic character of the Italian city convent. When a nun entered a house of some standing, she knew exactly which family she came from and its position in both the inside and outside world. Silvia Evangelisti recently described a historian nun named Angelica Baitelli, from the Benedictine convent of Santa Giulia in Brescia, whose brother wrote a famous defense of the privileges of the Lombardian nobility when faced with absorption into Venetian territories. Angelica, drawing on the convent's vast archive of chronicles and property documents (most of them in Latin), traced the history of her convent also with an eye to making a historic affirmation of its privileges, which dated back to the Middle Ages and had been bestowed by the rulers of Lombardy. She justified her endeavours on the grounds that she had a considerable knowledge of Latin, which many of her sisters might not have. But there can be little doubt that she was putting on record exactly what the rights of the convent were¹⁸ by reference to legal text. In short, she was doing for her convent what her brother had done for the nobility.

Nor did the post-Tridentine convent escape the reverberations of city politics within their allegedly newly severed status. Renée Baernstein has demonstrated that, in seventeenth-century Milan, elections of an abbess could generate the same kinds of divisions and alignments as were visible in the political contests of the city and that the triumph of a particular nun in reaching high office was a reflection of dynastic contests outside.¹⁹

The seventeenth century saw some developments in convent experience which were profoundly important in social and cultural terms. The reforms of St Teresa within the Carmel in the late sixteenth century inspired the Spanish monarch Philip II, and more extensively Philip III, to lend encouragement and the promise of financial support to an expansionary activity into Latin America

¹⁸ S. Evangelisti, 'Angelica Baitelli, la storica', in G. Calvi (ed.), *Barocco al femminile* (Rome, 1992), pp. 71-95.

¹⁹ R. Baernstein, 'The Counter-Reformation Convent: The Angelics of Sao Paolo in Milan, 1535-1653' (unpub. PhD thesis., Harvard University, 1993).

and into France and the Low Countries. The Carmel, an austere form of the religious life making heavy demands upon the sisters in terms of material deprivation, was interpreted by the Spanish crown as an essentially Spanish (and therefore both religiously and spiritually correct) interpretation of convent life. It was to be exported because its very Spanish's implied a political commitment by the families that placed their daughters there. The Carmel demanded little in the way of dowries and those it drew in were obviously attracted by the rigour, intensity and solitude of the life of contemplation and discipline. Yet, ironically, many of the very women who had made this choice found themselves on the road or even the high seas and were subject to all kinds of misadventures, as wheels fell off carriages, or political crises caused the blockading of ports they desired to enter. Furthermore, when they arrived at their destination, pressures were considerable to move on and found anew.

Let us follow the fortunes of the small band of five Carmelites who left the Carmel of Salamanca at the king's behest in 1603, under the leadership of Aña de Jesus, a nun who perhaps more than any other inherited the mantle of St Teresa, to whom she had been devoted. Concha Torres has described the long journey that took the band first to the French capital, where a group of noble women organised by Barbe Acarie helped them install themselves in a house provided by the combined efforts of the waiting women, and from thence to Brussels where the Archduchess Isabella was waiting for their arrival. To have the patronage of the Archduchess was important and she involved not only other Spanish grandees of the court – such as her ladies-in-waiting – but helped the new convent to draw in daughters of the local aristocracy. Within ten years as many houses were founded. But the experience was not without problems. First, and this was a problem which generally beset new foundations, buildings were readily given but they were not always suitable. Some, though large, were old and damp: second, it was always easier to get such buildings than to amass sufficient running costs. The Spanish monarchy initially accorded the

Carmelites the profits of justice for the cities in which they were installed. But these had to be taken over from the Jesuits, who had been helped in a similar way, and, in any case, the money was always paid retroactively.

There was a tendency to regard Carmelites as being able to live on nothing, given the austerity of their rule. While ever stressing the generosity of the king in providing for them, the nuns wrote back to Salamanca for extra supplies of candles, woolen blankets, and warm garments. They found the cold particularly difficult and described how one nun singed her garments in trying to warm herself by a small fire. Eventually, many problems were solved when individual houses received an influx of wealth through the entry of a widow, who brought with her sufficient funds to make the house a little more comfortable. The nuns were also plagued by the constant company of visiting ladies, who usually accompanied the Archduchess and who clearly expected chat. The Carmelites begged for more privacy. In time, the houses gained a settled existence, though the survival of some (Mons, for example) was always problematic. Yet the sisters also claimed for themselves a share, through their prayers and presence, in the victories of war.²⁰

If the Carmelites in the Spanish Netherlands experienced danger and cold as well as adventures, the fate of those who left Salamanca and other Spanish cities to establish themselves in Latin America was yet more traumatic. Convents in the New World had a cultural mission to promote Spanish values and to educate both the daughters of the Spanish aristocracy and, increasingly, those of the permanent settlers who sometimes intermarried with the native population. These convents attracted money and bequests. Presents of artistic artefacts were sent them from the Old World and the Carmelite rituals, ceremonies, processions, and celebrations of Spanish victories enabled them to become, very promptly, an intrinsic part of New World culture. Their educational and religious function made them purveyors of values. The literary expressions of convent life, the *vidas* and chronicles, gained a distinctive form

²⁰ C. Torres, 'A Nun and her Letters: Mother Aña de Jesus', in Hufton (ed.), *Women in the Religious Life*, pp. 96-111; and idem, *Aña de Jesus Cartas (1590-1621): religiosidad y vida cotidiana en la clausura femenina del siglo d'oro* (Salamanca, 1995).

as they developed in a new environment in which the sacred and the overtly superstitious and profane jostled shoulders. Away from the considerable cities, the convents also acquired a very significant economic status as they amassed considerable amounts of capital from postulants' dowries. The convents thus became, as Katherine Burns demonstrates for the Peruvian city of Cuzco, primary banking centres, using their wealth to make loans at interest to the local farming communities.²¹

While the transplanted nuns of Latin America were intent upon transmitting a particular heritage to populations where they themselves were initially strangers (though within generations this was no longer true), back in some European countries the changes of the Protestant Reformation had made impossible the perpetuation of Catholic cultural forms. In England, for example, elite Catholic families (Percys, Howards, Stonors, and others) found themselves isolated and in particular their children cut off from a Catholic education. Many sent their sons to Louvain and their daughters to convents on the continent, which progressively accumulated stocks of Englishwomen taking religious vows. Most of these went to Brussels or to the Benedictine houses, in particular at Cambrai and Antwerp, and in the other large cities in the Spanish Netherlands relatively close to English shores. The women, often termed *les dames anglaises*, assumed a particular role as guardians of a fortress faith. Theirs was a voluntary exile but it was also purposeful. The histories of these women, as related by Caroline Boden, Victoria James and Dorothy Glatz, reveal them as teachers of young girls who were often immigrant relatives, and who would return one day to England as Catholic brides and eventually mothers who would perpetuate the faith through their own children.

The *dames anglaises* were also translators of Catholic works which were at the cutting edge of Catholic thought on the continent, such as the works of St Francis of Sales. Some of their translations remained in manuscript but several were published and the convents built up considerable libraries. The catalogue of the Benedictine convent at Cambrai, for example, reveals that they had 3928

²¹ K. Burns, 'Convents, Culture and Society in Cuzco, Peru, 1550-1865' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1993).

volumes, mostly in English and French but some, as well, in Latin. Few of them (a mere 13) appear to have been original compositions by the nuns themselves. More were translations, which demanded their own skill.

Furthermore, there was an immense effort to present an image of correctness and excellence. Music, for example, pronounced to the outside world that the English ladies were accomplished (as gentlewoman) and they were particularly concerned that the outside society should know of the sophistication and beauty that they could impart to divine service.

To give one instance, the English Benedictines in Brussels had a chaplain, Robert Champion, himself an exile from his native land, who was a fine musician. He taught the nuns to pronounce and phrase Latin so well that when they began 'to keep choire', Brussels society marvelled at their expertise. Elsewhere, Richard Dering, renowned as a composer, was employed by the abbess at Louvain, Mary Percy, to teach the choir to sing and some of the more talented women to play the organ. One English nun, Mary Scudamore, actually brought with her an organ, valued at £45, which she could play; and she also taught others.²²

Yet these details should not disguise the difficulties which beset the nuns in exile. Many depended for financial support on money sent from their families, themselves hard pressed by the special fines and levies imposed on the great recusant houses. During the English civil wars, communication with their native land could be interrupted and funds were cut off. It became extremely difficult for pupils to travel, so that this too meant a loss of funding, an increased sense of isolation, and perhaps, as well, a sense that their mission to preserve and hand on their faith to their fellow countrypeople was interrupted.

²² These comments draw heavily upon the significant and richly textured work of C. Boden, 'Literacy and Learning in the English Convents of Flanders and France in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century' (unpub. paper at Conference on 'Women in Religious Communities', Centre for Italian Studies, University of Reading, 1998). Victoria James of Merton College, Oxford, has a thesis in progress on the literary forms employed by these exiles.

This may have stimulated further their literary endeavours and have given a growing significance to the work of copying and publishing, to keep open an important channel for the dissemination of new works. These works, sent back to their families, thus helped to maintain the intellectual vigour of their faith.

Politics can make for interesting if difficult times. In those Protestant countries where Catholicism was a fortress faith, or where Catholic families experienced difficulties in procuring instruction for their families, there was a real need for active work. In Holland, groups of women known as *Kloppen* emerged, who led a secret existence but taught catechism and prayers to young children and helped to perpetuate Catholic baptism.²³ In the history of English nuns, Mary Ward (1585-1645) occupies an important space as someone who wanted to serve as an active missionary in the manner of the Jesuits, to infiltrate British society by perilous undercover work as did Robert Parsons. Her vows were taken with the Poor Clares at St Omer in 1606; but she and five companions yearned for more action and broke away to found a group committed to an active apostolate for women. They founded houses in Liège, Cologne, Vienna, and in 1629 arrived in Rome to seek recognition from the pope. But he, and indeed the entire Catholic establishment, was hostile and insisted upon the strict enclosure laid down by Pius V. When Mary Ward persisted, she was imprisoned in 1631 in the Convent of the Poor Clares in Munich. In some despair, she returned to England and founded a convent near Fountains Abbey in 1642, which moved to Micklegate Bar at York in 1686.²⁴ It meant that the active apostolate she had envisaged was not to occur in England.

Instead, it was in France in the middle decades of the seventeenth century that a coach and horses were driven through the notion of obligatory enclosure for those who embraced religious life. There was a movement away from solemn to

²³ M. Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden: leven tussen klooster en wereld in Noord Nederland gedurende de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum, Verloren, 1996).

²⁴ M. Rowlands, 'Recusant Women, 1560-1640', in M. Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society, 1500-1800* (London, 1985) and S. O'Brien, 'Women of the English Catholic Community: Nuns and Pupils of the Bar Convent, York, 1680-1790', *Monastic Studies*, 1 (1985).

Yet the French state had a vested interest in the development of these women's orders. Sixteenth-century France had not moved towards an overall commitment to help for the needy through a parish rate, state subsidy, or other obligatory tax. Although some cities, such as Lyons, accepted responsibility and made some provision for the indigenous poor, almost nothing extended to the rural parishes. Furthermore, the French monarchy became a protagonist of the idea of an *hôpital général* for the incarceration and protection of the poor of an area, to be financed from an amalgamation of older hospitals, the anticipated bequests of the pious, and local privileges in the form of some indirect taxation conceded either locally or given by the monarchy. The finances were, in most instances, shoestring. However, an idea grew from an experiment conducted in Paris by Vincent de Paul. He, and perhaps in fact still more, Louise de Marillac, an energetic and deeply practical as well as spiritual widow, pioneered the establishment of a group of trained women, the Daughters of Charity, as a force to help the sick in villages but also, at the behest of communities, to serve the hospitals. The Daughters were good village girls, trained initially in the houses of elite women, and prepared to go, by invitation of the seigneur or his wife and with the promise of their material support, into the villages of France to tend the sick and perhaps to provide simple schooling. The monarchy interpreted such women as the cheapest and most professional way of providing professional cadres for the new experiment of the *hôpital général*.

The Daughters of Charity were not in fact the first of such female initiatives to live a life of service in the world. In Italy in 1534, Angela Merici of Brescia had gathered a group of women to respond to the needs of the villages. In any situation where the relief of poverty depended on institutions, such as the great hospitals, the villages and small towns fared badly. These Ursulines, as they became known, flourished and were to enter France in the opening decades of the seventeenth century and to spread through the invitation of Jesuit priests

simple vows, which included notions of stability in the house (the ancient Benedictine promise) and made the women accountable to a general superior and to the authority of the Bishop, who had to give permission for them to operate in the diocese under his administration. The women thus bound together formed a 'congregation' or were known as *filles agrégées* or *associées*. They had no cloister and many of them no chapel beyond the use of the parish church. This revolution in women's religious organisation was the result of a very complex interaction, involving Jesuits and some bishops, a number of great churchmen such as St Vincent de Paul, the monarchy and the elites, who were committed to associations promoting a practical, hands on, Catholicism, and the women who joined, or gave money to get the orders going, themselves.²⁵ The changes are not to be attributed to a simple process akin to spontaneous combustion. Indeed, in many instances, the process of change was highly political. It is significant that this transformation of the religious life occurred in France – though the new orders were to be developed in other countries in the nineteenth century – because, of all the daughters of the Roman Catholic Church, the French were perhaps the least reluctant to adopt a stance that Rome itself did not promote.

The spirit of change was born of the realisation of the need for practical services in a problem-filled world. Schooling for young children to ensure that they were firm in the Catholic faith and its disciplines as well as basically literate: welfare services for the sick or the infirm aged, whether they were in hospitals or in the wider community, also demanded outreach and mobility. The monarchy did not oppose such developments, though it moved in the 1690s to limit how much wealth widows in particular could give to such religious orders or how much could be bequeathed to them. Louis XIV's justification for this stance was that families were being impoverished by the zeal with which women were embracing this form of activity. And, underneath this concern, lay the fear that land might be shifting out of the tax bracket as privileged church property.

²⁵ C. Jones, *The Charitable Imperative: Hospitals and Nursing in Ancien Regime and Revolutionary France* (London, 1989); P. Coste, *Les filles de charité: l'Institut de 1617 à 1800* (Paris, 1913); and E. Rapley, *Les dévôtes: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal, 1990).

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and with the financial help of elite women. But, with few exceptions, Ursuline groups took the decision to accept claustration. They continued to run schools and were highly successful in educating the daughters of nobles, who had converted back to Catholicism in the aftermath of the Edict of Nantes. The Jesuits also used them for mission purposes. Natalie Davis has shown in her marvellously evocative study of Mère Marie de l'Incarnation, one such truly strong woman, who responded to the Jesuits' encouragement to go with them to Canada and to establish a school and a hospice as well as a convent for the sisters themselves, with the purpose of educating Indian women, the mothers of the next generation, in the Catholic faith. Natalie Davis examines through her writings not merely her sense of mission but the pioneering spirit of Mère Marie and the handful of women who accompanied her. These women were entering dangerous territory, crossing the high seas into hostile terrain into geographical and climatic conditions that were totally new to them. In short, under the religious habit and proclaiming that they were cloistered, they were embracing adventures unknown to others of their sex.²⁶

The spread of Ursuline houses within France by 1620 was remarkable but their decision to accept claustration meant that their forward movement in that country receded. Instead, the model of the Daughters of Charity gripped the imagination of those who saw the need for an internal mission of mercy. Orders proliferated. Amongst them was one, the Sisters of St Joseph, which has especially attracted my attention, and which was probably the largest and most influential in France apart from the Daughters of Charity.²⁷

After the great diaspora generated by the Third Republic, the Sisters of St Joseph certainly became the most important women's religious order in North America. There they were responsible not merely for running orphanages, schools and child care services generally, but, in the great cities of the eastern

²⁶ M. de Chantal-Guendre, *Histoire de l'ordre des Ursulines en France* (Paris, 1957-60) and N.Z. Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

²⁷ M. Vacher, *Des régulières dans le siècle: les Soeurs de Saint Joseph du Père Médaille aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Clermont Ferrand, 1991).

part of the continent from Toronto through Boston and Philadelphia and then stretching into the mid-west, they were the means whereby generations of immigrant Americans issuing from Ireland to Italy were inducted in the Catholic faith and helped to survive. When I arrived in Harvard in 1987, the janitor of the house in which I lived told me, when I inquired about the demolition of a building across the road, that it was a school of the Sisters of St Joseph. He went on to say that, as part of a poor and large French Canadian family who came to Boston after the Second World War, he remembered the annual visits he and his mother made to the Sisters for shoes and winter coats, recycled, cleaned and mended, which the Sisters had collected from better off parishioners. He also remembered their help when a new baby was born and when the girls entered work.

The Sisters of St Joseph came into being in the 1640s, at the same time that the English emigrant nuns were copying manuscripts and books in Brussels. They were the product of concerted activity on the part of the Bishop of Le Puy in the Velay (a very barren sector of France's Massif Central), of some committed Jesuit confessors and parish priests, and a number of very willing women. A Jesuit priest on mission in the parish of Dunières identified two who were drawn to his attention by the parish priest as women with a social mission. They had dowries of 500 and 400 *livres* respectively as well as an annual three bushels of wheat that were prepared to put to communal use. By the next year, six further women had been found who were either widows or pious spinsters from scattered villages in the region (hence the need for coordination) and the group were prepared to take simple vows of modesty, life service to the community, and stability in their houses. Part of the group offered services to the hospital in Le Puy which largely catered for the sick, and the rest served a small orphanage in Montferrand. They did not live in these institutions but in adjacent houses; and they gave their services for free.

The model of the Sisters of St Joseph captured the imagination of several generations of women. The practise of *filles associées or agrégées* (as clusters of

from three to six women, established in particular villages in modest dwellings either belonging to one of them or loaned or given for their use by local people, whilst maintaining a general association with a coordinating superior, who lived with a larger group in a town some miles away) became widely established in the region. Many of these women had small dowries but most of them expected to do some paid work for their own support. They lived in a region where ribbon weaving and lace making were developing as part of the local economy. They did not take a vow of poverty but they lived poorly. Many were illiterate. They had a rule which roughly divided their day into paid work, devotion, and visits to the sick and the handicapped or to deal with some temporary problem in poor families. Within their cottages (for many of their houses were no more) space could be found for two or three children whose mothers were sick or who had been orphaned and were destined for the orphanage at Montferrand but who needed temporary care. In some instances, a few village girls were taught lace making by the sisters who were themselves workers. They also liaised with the parish priest and local families, so as to identify pressing needs and to importune better-off families on behalf of the unfortunate for help in kind such as food. They also helped young girls to find respectable service positions through their connections with the mother house.

The Sisters of St Joseph and similarly active religious orders burgeoned throughout the eighteenth century, when recruitment to contemplative orders for women was falling very fast. The active order was sustained by women, who saw in social work and the back-breaking duties which accompanied hospital service, a fulfilling and spiritually dedicated life mission in the company of other women of like intent. The recruits to the orders were usually village girls who had witnessed the life on offer and had some small means to support themselves. Under legislation in the 1690s, Sisters could receive gifts to be used for the needy of the area, or for a designated end, but could not accumulate property in their own name. This did not preclude, in some instances, raising money to construct a school or an orphanage.

The ambiguous status of property managed or occupied by the Sisters of St Joseph (and similar orders) raised some interesting questions at the time of the French Revolution when church property was declared to belong to the nation. Individual groups counteracted with proof that the property, particularly the houses in which they were living, either belonged to individuals of their group or else to families in the village. Such claims permitted them to delay implementation of the official policy of confiscation.

During the Revolution, many members of the women's orders were imprisoned for what was described as counter-revolutionary activity. By this was meant adherence, first to a priest who had defied the Revolutionary legislation by refusing to take an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (which converted him into a salaried agent of the state) and then to priestly attempts to organise a positive opposition to dechristianisation. By sheltering priests prepared to administer clandestine masses, by continuing to hold catechism classes and maintaining Christian practice through the rosary, they kept the faith alive in the villages where officialdom was weak. Jules Michelet, Republican, anticlerical and historian, believed (allegedly from the oral testimony of his aunt) that the most overt centres of hostility to the government and the seat of Counter Revolution in Brittany were those where the Sisters of St Thomas of Villeneuve had entrenched themselves. Certainly, in the Massif Central, the influence of the Sisters of St Joseph and the Dames de l'Instruction (known as *béates*) was very strong. They worked in the villages to help the needy and even, in the case of the *béates*, were not just the priest's helpers but also, in some areas, organised village lace production, served as initial teachers of young girls, offered creche services for working mothers and provided communal facilities such as reflective globes to facilitate evening work.

As such, the nuns commanded local allegiances and slipped easily in many cases through the net of Revolutionary penal legislation. In Michelet's view,

they constituted the main obstacle to the implantation of Republican values. He interpreted the Sister as a powerful agent of acculturation imposing her Catholic values upon generations of young children, some of whom would eventually become mothers and would perpetuate the process of religious implantation.²⁸

Although Revolutionary persecution took its immediate toll of victims and made recruitment during the troubled 1790s virtually impossible, once the Directory in 1794-5 relaxed its punitive grip the orders reformed. Their real growth, however, followed the Napoleonic Concordat.²⁹ In particular, after 1808, the formation of new orders as well as the re-emergence of the old was encouraged by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The civil authorities had a clear interest in trying to put together once more the welfare services in hospitals and institutions which had been staffed by nuns and which, as a result of war and the loss of privileges and properties, were in total disarray. Recruitment burgeoned both amongst the young and older women denied entry to the religious life during the previous twenty years. Demographic losses among the number of active males who fought during the Napoleonic wars may also have helped to swell numbers, as the effect of wars up to the 1950s was always to multiply the numbers of women who had not found suitable marriage partners and who therefore sought companionship and fulfilling work. But these were far from the only recruits. The numbers of women in religious orders – and in the active orders in particular – by 1870 exceeded the entire secular and regular male clergy combined.

These women were characterised by a strong *esprit de corps* and sense of professionalism in their work. Indeed, their powers of initiative have prompted recent generations of feminist historians to talk of *le féminisme en religion* in so far as the teachers, nurses and welfare workers of the women's orders eschewed matrimony and the conventional life cycle experiences, to dedicate themselves

²⁸ O. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992), pp. 133-54.

²⁹ C. Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin: les Congrégations françaises à Supérieure Générale au XIX siècle* (Paris, 1984) is a statistically hugely informative work, which first drew attention to the scope of this expansion.

in the company of other women to specific social ends. They attracted the admiration of other European nations. The Italians and Spanish invited groups of French sisters – they particularly admired the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of St Charles of Nancy – to bring their skills into their countries.

These women also began to infiltrate Asia and Africa, as part of missionary expansion, although the nuns generally remained in the larger towns to run the orphanages that have become associated with their memory and then to secure a Catholic education for the children of colonisers as well as for the converted. The ultimate idea was that the indigenous populations themselves would come to populate these houses. And, in some instances, for example in Goa and what is now Sri Lanka, the strong dowry system existing for the marriage of daughters and the undervalourisation of the female sex, contributed to the realisation of this goal. Indeed, the manifestations of the success of the Asian implantation can be seen in Europe today where a reverse process of importation has occurred and young nuns from Sri Lanka fill in some part the void left by the shortfall in European recruitment.

In many instances, the experience of the nineteenth-century nun appears more varied and more geographically variegated than ever before. As teachers of young girls they had never been more in demand. Even in anticlerical France, the most committed Republicans of any social standing preferred the refined atmosphere of a convent school for their daughters to the laicised village school of rough children to which allegedly they were politically and intellectually committed. There was also a marked expansion in convent workshops, some of them veritable sweatshops, in which adolescent girls worked for low wages to produce goods that undercut outside production.

Another aspect of the impact of industrialisation on forms of convent initiatives was the development of worker dormitories for young girls coming into the city from outside to find work. Alice Kelikian has shown how parents, parish priests, and employers in Lombardy favoured the development of such institutions to preserve the honour of their daughters in the possibly corrupting

environment of urban life.³⁰ The history of these young worker dormitories has been written largely in terms of 'social control' and the induction of habits acceptable to employers such as punctuality and tractability. But an alternative view is to see the dormitories for the protection of young women as guarantors of clean accommodation, proper food, and the reduction of the chances of illegitimate motherhood as a result of unprotected sex. Certainly, this was how parents viewed the dormitories. Although dowries were made illegal in Italy after 1870, it was still customary for a girl to acquire a trousseau of goods to see her through matrimony. The girl could save her wages and be encouraged to do so. What the services provided by the convent-dormitories did was to make possible ends deemed needful or desirable by the society of which the young women were a part.

The survival strategies of many young Irish girls and their families can be demonstrated by the development in nineteenth-century Ireland of lace- or crochet-producing convents. These were very much on the model, if somewhat less extensive, of those of Bruges or Ghent which had developed from the seventeenth century onwards. The introduction of lacemaking and crochet work by convents, Protestant clergymen's wives, or by the local gentry both before and after the Famine were intended to help a young woman to save towards certain desirable ends. One was to help her family of origin, usually by buying a cow or pig. Secondly, she must save towards establishing a viable household for her own future. And, in some cases, her work transcended these ends and became the means whereby families in the later nineteenth century found the money to emigrate.

Lace is a very particular commodity, demanding years of training before proficiency is acquired. It also demands a clean environment as the fragile work can soon blacken if the worker's hands and clothes are dirty or the environment about her is smoke-laden. An Irish cabin was not a fit atmosphere for the making of high-grade lace. A convent workshop, such as the Presentation Convent at Youghall or the Ursuline Convent at Blackrock, County Cork,

³⁰ A. Kelikian, 'Nuns, Entrepreneurs and Church Welfare in Italy, in Hufton (ed.), *Women and the Religious Life*, pp. 119-37.

could provide the requisite environment and the support services attendant upon the early learning period. The nuns could then help a young girl to save her earnings until she had enough perhaps to purchase a cow for her parents and, after more work, one for the household she and her husband-to-be would form.

In the aftermath of marriage, much depended on how much time the woman commanded and whether the convent remained accessible. But, if these conditions were fulfilled, piece work might eventually yield enough to buy the husband's ticket to North America.³¹ Here he was intended to work to establish a home and eventually to buy a ticket for any children and perhaps his wife as well. She too, however, was expected to work towards this end. Perhaps the final instalment of the story was the moment at which she sold the remaining family possessions and departed. She took care to take her sewing needles with her, because even while lace was not made in America, the early department stores much appreciated the sewing skills of convent-taught Irishwomen.

If then little changed in the forms of the conventual life in the nineteenth century, territorial movement and adaptation became more and more common. In the course of that century, the British overcame their fear of the nun. The furore and suspicion of the convent evinced in the Loveday Affair in the 1820s, when an outraged father claimed that his two daughters had been enticed away by the nuns of a French convent, made headlines in the newspapers on either side of the Channel.³² This kind of hysteria gave way to an acceptance of the conventual life by the end of the century. Even so, the English have never been massive producers of nuns.

The emergence of Anglican nuns showed the panic was over and that a woman's choice of the convent was not a fundamental breach of a Protestant code. When Florence Nightingale openly declared that had the Sisters of Charity existed in Britain, her efforts to introduce a nursing service would have been unnecessary, she implicitly acknowledged a model of discipline and

³¹ Anon., Ireland: *Industrial and Agricultural* (Cork, 1902), pp. 420-35.

³² Prof. Caroline Ford (University of British Columbia) has work-in-progress on the Loveday affair.

service she admired. That model fed into secular nursing and caring services the world over by the end of the nineteenth century, insofar as personal dedication, corporate identity, and selflessness – as well as under-remuneration – were seen as hallmarks of women who embarked upon these career paths. (Moreover, and with exceptions, a marriage bar reserved such work for the single). But, as alternative visions opened up for women in the aftermath of the two World Wars and as professional and educational opportunities extended, recruitment to the convents has receded. The age lost much of its faith and the replication of ideas over the generations was abruptly severed.

The nun's history, of which only a few episodes have been related here, must, it has been urged in this brief survey, always be seen in the context of the society of which she is a part. She represents the beliefs and aspirations of that society or a part of it: she also demonstrates both the limits of the possible for women at any one time and in many contexts shows that the sister's habit and vocation could lead her beyond possibilities available to women in the wider society. She serves not just as a marker of belief patterns, but of economic imperatives embodied in survival strategies. She is critical to the understanding of the process of acculturation in many societies and her efforts ensured the continuity of a fortress faith. The ebb and flow of recruitment marks social change and shifting boundaries.

Viewed from the perspective of the woman who took her vows, whether freely or as part of a family plan she was powerless to resist, a study of individual women in religion throws unexpected light on some creative opportunities. If never 'a room of one's own', the book-lined cell could be a space confirming an artistic identity. Or teaching skills and the potential to help others in the business of survival could carry their own satisfaction. Above all, the many stories of the nun – which have so gained in richness and texture over the past two decades – allow us to reflect upon how a preoccupation with women's experience has so altered our understanding of the world we have lost.
