



CONFERENCE REPORT: HISTORIANS OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND (H-WRBI) 2017 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

By Flora Derounian and Alison More

'I'm going to a nun conference', was the rather flippant reply I made to friends and colleagues when they asked about my upcoming trip to Dublin. This statement evoked reactions ranging from laughter to fascination and intrigue, emotions which – to me – sum up the experience of the 2017 H-WRBI annual conference at University College Dublin.

Coming to the conference as a religious novice (if you will), from Italian studies, with an interest in the oral history of women's work, I was attracted to the theme of the conference: 'Sources: Archival, Oral, Visual, Material, Digital'. This signalled to me a contemporary, practical, and interdisciplinary approach to what is usually a firmly historical area of study. What I found was a thriving and encouraging intellectual community, which - so different to other areas of academia – takes a supportive and multivocal approach.

Day one began with a stroll across UCD's glorious campus to the first panel. Two minutes into the first paper by Margaret Susan Thompson (Syracuse) and I had already learned a new word, 'kyriarchy', a social system of domination. Thompson went on to uncover a fascinating world in which male clergy withheld sacraments from women religious as a form of control and punishment. Eliot Nidam Orvieto's (Tel Aviv) contribution particularly piqued my own research interests, with an impassioned and incredibly detailed paper about religious orders who hid Jews during WW2. My work on Italian religious had previously grazed the surface of nuns' political activity during WW2, there is obviously a goldmine here to be exploited.

Panel two featured a fascinating discussion of the work of women religious, and both Áine McHugh and Deirdre Bennet underlined the invaluable work of women religious in providing and managing education for girls. Lunch was spent watching UCD's resident ducks chilling out on the lake, and then it was straight back to business with my panel with Ellen Regan (UCD) and Carmen M Mangion (Birkbeck) on oral testimonies. I was delighted to have been put in a panel on oral testimonies, and was transported by Ellen and Carmen's papers. Both touched upon the specificity of women religious as subjects of oral histories, and investigated the idea of collective scripts through a number of fascinating interviews collected with contemporary nuns.

The day reached its climax with the keynote address, given this year by Susan O'Brien (Cambridge). Her paper highlighted this misrepresentation of women religious in media, and the influence of changing social contexts on how we tell the stories of women religious. O'Brien noted 'a turn to religious history, with women and gender at its heart'; if the first day of the annual H-WRBI conference is anything to go by, she could not have spoken a truer word.

Flora Derounian is a final-year PhD student at the University of Bristol. Her thesis studies representations and testimonies of Italian working women between 1945 and 1965. Derounian has completed a body of oral-history interviews with Italian women religious which she hopes to turn into a series of mini-documentaries.

Day two of the conference continued to offer a variety of panels organised by theme. As we had discovered on the first day, this facilitated complex discussions of issues that transcended limitations of both time and geography –which continued during coffee and lunch breaks. Again, questions were taken immediately after each paper to allow participants to move between panels held in adjoining rooms. The offerings of the day were grouped into 'Archives and Histories', 'Sources and Interpretations (II-III)', and 'Founding, Financing and Sustaining'.

As any scholar of women religious knows, taking a flexible and multi-disciplinary approach to sources can often yield new and surprising insights. Kristof Smeyers began the first panel by discussing his work on a database of female stigmatics. In his paper, 'Between Saints and Celebrities', Smeyers both introduced the phenomenon of stigmata, and illustrated the complexities of exploring the roles this phenomenon played in female sanctity. In particular, Smeyers discussed both the challenges faced by his project team and the ways in which non-traditional archival material (including the occasional envelope of fingernails) can shed light on the cultural history of the promotion and popular response to mysticism.

The next two papers in this session explored written sources. Roberta Anderson introduced writings from the final years of the Monastery of the Glorious Assumption of our Blessed Lady. Founded in 1565/7 in Brussels, this community had a long and complex history. Fears of suppression by revolutionary forces brought this community back to England in 1794, where it existed until its eventual closure in 1976. Anderson's paper concentrated on the final years of the community in which the sisters faced difficulties including responding to the liturgical changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. At the same time the sisters were far from removed from the secular world – and greeted England's 1966 World Cup win with the words 'Deo gratias! Deo gratias.' The session closed with Veronica O'Mara's paper, which explored the tradition of textuality among pre-modern religious women. Focussing on a psalter linked with Syon Abbey bearing the names of two Birgittine nuns, O'Mara demonstrated some of the glimpses of the literary and intellectual culture of convents that are revealed in manuscripts.

The second session on sources began with Alison More exploring the ways in which official order histories have been used to obscure the vital and vibrant role that women religious played in the pre-modern world. This was followed by Bronagh McShane's insightful commentary on the difficulties in constructing a history of Irish women in early modern Continental religious houses. Focussing primarily on the

Dominican convent of *Bom Sucesso* in Lisbon, McShane explored the ways that unexplored records and sources can contribute to our understanding of early modern Irish women in exile. The session closed with Núria Jornet-Benito and Concepción Rodríguez-Parada introducing the exciting work of the network 'Spiritual Landscapes', a project that explores the transformation of women's religiosity in the Iberian kingdoms. Here, they both introduced a confraternity book (the *Libre de Confraria del Roser del any 1489*) and discussed its potential uses for a broader investigation of devotional societies.

In parallel sessions, scholars explored various insights into the world of religious archiving. Barbara Vesey and Eibhlis Connaughton explored the challenges of balancing expectations of researchers and community as a lay archivist in a religious order. Jennifer Head spoke about women religious and the sciences, leading to numerous twitter posts about a 'Flying nun'. Caroline Watkinson challenged the mythology of passivity and renunciation to examine convents as political institutions. Other scholars focused on convent finance. Again, papers showed that some issues and concerns transcended temporal borders as Sarah Moran examined the ways in which account books from Court Beguinages in the early modern Low Countries offered insights into both the daily life and social role of beguine communities. Catriona Delaney examined finances in the modern world, with a particular focus on the Presentation Sisters in Ireland.

As with day one, the conference included an impressive and enlightening diversity of sources and subjects relating to the history of women religious. The mix of both disciplines and approaches helped to illustrate the many contributions that women religious have made to all aspects of society – often while appearing to remain on the margins. The broad appeal of our discussions both in the panels and elsewhere is indicated on twitter, with #nuntastic often appearing alongside #HWRBI17. The live tweets allowed the Dublin experience to be shared by absent H-WRBI colleagues and nun-enthusiasts throughout the world.

Alison More's research investigates the intersections between social and religious culture of in Northern Europe from 1250 to 1450. She is particularly interested in the evolution of female quasi-religious groups, especially those whose history is often ignored. This is explored in her forthcoming book, Fictive Orders and Feminine Religious Identities.