

History and Nuns in Belfield

What's not to like about an early summer conference in the Belfield campus of University College Dublin? And this one was on the history of women religious from medieval to modern times, examining cultural and social issues of gender and religion. As a long term member of History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland (H-WRBI) I had this conference in my sights all year. A knee replacement in the Spring gave me some pause. But once back driving again, nothing could deter me and I forgot about age gaps.

The campus was quiet at 8.30 on a wet Thursday morning, but all the new buildings were a shock not to mention the car parks. The old science blocks are no longer green, but at least the lake is in its place. The functional but ugly covered-in walkway hasn't moved either thankfully. I blessed whoever put the H-WRBI flyers here and there along its concrete pillars. In the new Science Centre some theatres are inter-leading which is a great idea. This extra-mature student found the prospect of the steep steps daunting from the top. Ah well, baby steps then, wishing I'd brought my walking stick.

While still a little damp, it was a relief to find a more positive approach to the religious life of sisters in particular. In Ireland at present we are familiar with much media disparagement of nuns. Indeed public opinion at times seems to hold that it would be best if all sisters were to disappear and the sooner the better. This might explain the dearth of new writing about a way of life that has indeed 'changed utterly'. A further disturbing suggestion that sisters are targets of double discrimination, as women and as religious, would also seem to have validity. Victimhood however is unappealing and to be resisted I decided.

Margaret Susan Thompson (Peggy) from Syracuse University introduced the concept of 'kyriarchy' a *à* Fiorenza. This kind of lordship Peggy explained, could be exercised by women also, as distinct from patriarchy. I got that. "I am not a theologian", Peggy insisted. No problem there either. I myself had approached theology backwards *via Feminist Theology*. In later life one becomes grateful for some past mistakes. This speaker discussed occasions and patterns where religious women were at times deprived by clerics of Holy Communion and reserved Blessed Sacrament, because they were deemed 'deviant or insufficiently submissive'. She argues that 'this is a highly "political" topic ...in the context of ecclesiastical power: who exercises hegemony (and) who is permitted agency'. Today does the increasing liturgical role of the laity in some places not raise similar control issues?

Niamh Lenahan from the University of Limerick provided my excuse for this postmodern revisiting of the student world. Her thesis is on our founder, Venerable Mary Potter. Niamh detailed the turbulent arrival of the Little Company of Mary into Ireland, in good time for the 'Rebellion'. Negotiations were sometimes strained with hierarchical authorities locally. Bishops expected to control the emerging voluntary hospital system as well as the ministries of the many sisters who provided a willing, economical labour force with minimum funding.

I would love to have heard Bridget Harrison's discuss more about the biographical accounts of the constructions of spirituality and vocation which underpinned the corporate identity of

the newly-emerging congregations of nuns. This spirituality of course, inspired their often phenomenal efforts and achievements on behalf of the less fortunate.

Jacinta Prunty is Head of History at Maynooth University and herself a Holy Faith sister. She has researched a fraught area in Ireland at present: the history of Magdalen laundries and the role of the religious sisters in their management. Her book, [*The Monasteries, Magdalen asylums and reformatory schools of Our Lady of Charity in Ireland 1853-1973*](#) has just been published. Scandals of abuse have beset the area of care of vulnerable children and adults. And the handling of such reports by authorities of church and state has contributed to the current decline in the status of sisters which I mentioned above. The Keynote speaker, Susan O'Brien touched on this accountability under two main themes: 'social care: whose story can we tell?' and 'follow the funding'.

Since the talks were concurrent I had to choose and thus, can give only a flavour of Day 1. Indeed this does not pretend to be a report in any sense since my knee forbade a second sedentary day. The standard of this first day's speakers confirmed for me the view I'd often heard asserted: that women academics have to be five times as good as their male counterparts.

The only male speaker I heard was Eliot Nidam Orvieto from Yad Vashem who is studying at Tel Aviv University. Concentrating on France, he examined how some women religious there, helped rescue Jews from the Holocaust. Eliot also touched on this activity by sisters in other countries across Europe. There are difficulties of eliciting information even now about the dangerous activity. Of course many of those involved have already died. But issues still arise relating to the issue of Baptism certificates as well as names and destinations -all highly confidential at the time. I have often wondered why our LCM sisters' role in this dangerous area in Italy is still so obscure. Even after the war it seems that many sisters commonly attributed the work to others. In our case the credit was regularly given to the Irishman, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty –the famous Vatican Pimpnel.

Carmen Mangion from Birkbeck, University of London provided me with another excuse for being here, since I had long been an admirer of her scholarship, archival as well as other areas. The focus of her study now is female religious life from 1945-1990 examining the close links between Irish and English convents during those living memory years. Many congregations like our own had provinces covering both jurisdictions and the majority of sisters were Irish or of Irish extraction. Carmen's analysis sheds light on this period which would otherwise be impossible to grasp by those of us whose noses were too close to the grindstone.

I opted for one paper on the Medical Missionaries of Mary including film clips of their flying doctor medical service in Africa in the 1960's. They are usually credited with being first into the breach, when in 1936, the Vatican finally relaxed the ban on sisters practicing maternity care. However Mary Potter, LCM founder pre-dated this campaign in negotiations in Rome already at the turn of the century. She was in the process of establishing a nurse training

school and argued that if midwifery were banned then many other areas of health care would be adversely affected.

From another era, and a world away in America, the Davis Studios have unearthed stories of the Holy Cross Sisters as Civil War nurses. With very limited supplies they cared for the wounded of both sides, sometimes triaging on the battlefield itself. Eventually a new naval hospital ship began to gain faster access to hospital care of the wounded by river. Sisters also served on the early ships becoming 'foremothers of today's US Naval Nursing Service'. Margaret Hultz and Marie Davis do pioneering work in digitalisation of material as other speakers also described.

Such novel methods of collecting and preserving documentation are changing all the time. The digitising process brings different disciplines together e.g. media, history, archives and so on. This is invaluable where sources can be widely dispersed across the globe, as are the archives of most religious congregations. But the privileging of inter-disciplinary boundaries is a priority in many academic areas. This is being challenged by feminist studies which pertain in all disciplines and are changing the landscape of most. I heard glancing mention of memory studies, film studies and much more but some constraints were leaning in as evening approached.

As I made my slow way back to the misty visitors' carpark (thankfully free for the summer) I reflected on a friendly Jesuit ghost who might haunt UCD. It is that of Michael Paul Gallagher SJ. I could imagine him navigating between these new buildings on his Ballymun bicycle. An esteemed lecturer in English, he could relate theology through the fictional lens of DH Lawrence and other unlikely authors. He was ahead of his time in this interdisciplinarity between literature and theology. He believed that to be successful it was necessary to speak to people imaginatively. Students of English today will never know what they have missed, since this last of the Jesuits left UCD in 1990.

Thankfully today imagination is not lacking in the choices by conference scholars of varied methodologies which are wide ranging and yet academically sound. The broad range of these approaches elicited rich narratives which, without such ability to read between the lines, would never have come to light. This goes some way towards answering [Flora Derounian's question as to whether the work of nuns is remembered as emancipatory and why?](#) I am left with the reassurance that however unrecognisable we sisters become in the future, our many achievements are in safe hands. This gives hope for balanced scholarship in future assessments, acknowledging much good done with no little sacrifice.

As well as the mistakes of the past the positive results of sisters' role needs to be recorded. Today academic research is a pressurised and competitive area. And as 'subjects' of this research women religious need to be able to trust the capacity of scholars to interpret their stories faithfully. This sincerity is palpable at H-WRBI in the desire to provide a voice and visibility which have too often been lost to women. This commitment is evidenced by their (H-WRBI's) inclusion of non-academic members such as myself.

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