

The Presentation Sisters and the Education of 'Poor Female Children' in Limerick, 1837-1870



The Presentation Sisters⁽¹⁾ arrived in Limerick in 1837, in response to a request for their educational services.

In so doing they were not only responding to an immediate need for schools in the city but also partaking of wider social trends and currents. The coming of the sisters to Limerick was part of the spread of Catholic institutions in Ireland in the early nineteenth century. They also participated in the creation of a widespread system of elementary education that had social as well as intellectual implications. They contributed to the elaboration of appropriate roles for women in nineteenth century Ireland, chiefly by means of the intellectual and vocational training provided in their schools for young female children. This article will explore how both the Presentation nuns and the myriad of young girls they taught in Limerick participated in, and benefited from, these developments.

It was a widely held belief in the early nineteenth century that one of the main factors that caused the social distress so evident in the country was the lack of educational provision for the Irish masses: it was felt that their ignorance not only hindered practical schemes for the improvement of their material conditions but also prevented them from developing habits of industry and systematic thinking. It was also assumed that a properly conducted system of elementary education would lead to an increased awareness of the benefits of 'The Constitution' and thus aid the effort at 'civilising' the Irish.⁽²⁾ Thus an elementary school system in Ireland was seen as a means of cultivating attitudes of political loyalty as well as promoting cultural assimilation.⁽³⁾ As the century progressed an additional social aim was given even greater prominence, namely the encouragement of respectability and decorum in the general population. This was particularly important after the famine because as well as undergoing great changes in the aftermath of that catastrophe, Irish society also developed many of the traits of the 'mid-Victorian'⁽⁴⁾ period. From the 1850s onwards much of the Irish population shared many of the preoccupations and

by Paula Coonerty

concerns of Victorians elsewhere. Propriety, gentility, conformity with appropriate social mores - these were the kind of social and cultural values which became increasingly important and the educational system proved a perfect means of inculcating these.

The state was not the only agency interested in the education of the Irish masses, of course: the Catholic church had a great involvement in this area. From 1780 to 1845 it moved from being a technically illegal organisation to being an accepted part of the structures of power and influence within Irish society.⁽⁵⁾ The churches, convents and schools appearing on the Irish landscape were adequate testimony to this. As one of its priorities, the church set about providing a Catholic education for its members and schools were vital to this effort, in particular the convent and monastery schools of the socially active nuns and brothers who now became so important in the life of the Catholic church. Previously, education for poorer Catholics had been very problematic. It was available in the popular Catholic day schools but only for those children whose parents could afford the minimal fee involved. The Protestant educational institutions, sponsored directly or indirectly by the State, did offer educational facilities to the very poor, but the majority of Catholic parents were unwilling to send their children to these schools because of their proselytising reputation. Thus the Catholic church itself had to provide educational facilities for its poorer members. Individuals (both clerical and lay) established and ran schools for the poor but, as mentioned above, by far the most numerous and effective of the church-sponsored schools were those run by the new Irish orders of nuns and brothers from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. These orders became a major means of dissemination of church influence, first among the urban poor (in particular in areas like Limerick) and later all over the country.⁽⁶⁾

The emergence and growth of female

religious congregations comprised one of the strongest religious movements in nineteenth century Catholic Europe.⁽⁷⁾ The pioneer of this movement in Ireland was Honora (Nano) Nagle, who founded the Presentation order in the 1770s, which had education as its major area of work. Nagle was a Cork woman who had spent a brief time in a convent in France before returning to Ireland at the end of the 1740s. She came back because she felt that life in an enclosed order was not compatible with her sense of vocation and that she "should run a great risk of salvation if [she] did not follow the inspiration [to return]".⁽⁸⁾ For the next twenty years or so she engaged in philanthropic work among the poor of Cork city, concentrating especially on educating poorer Catholic children in defiance of the Penal Laws. Wishing to give some continuity to her work, particularly after her death, Nagle financed the move to Ireland of a group of Ursuline nuns - the first female order to come to the country since the Reformation. However, the Ursulines were a traditional cloistered order, so their work among the poor proved to be disappointingly limited. She therefore resolved to found a new style organisation that would be purposely built for the type of work she felt most important. Thus Nagle and three other women formed the "Society of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart" whose aim was charitable work among the poor. By the time of Nagle's death in 1784, this new congregation had still not received final papal approval, and in order to do so had to adopt perpetual solemn vows and full enclosure in 1805. Henceforth the goal of the congregation was restricted to education alone, and that within the convent walls. By this stage, the organisation had also changed its name at the request of the remaining sisters, and was now known as the 'Institute of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary'. By the time the Presentation Sisters came to Limerick they were the most widespread of all the female religious, their convents comprising 55 per cent of the entire number of religious houses in Ireland.⁽⁹⁾



Nano Nagle, founder of the Presentation Sisters.

Although their motivation was purely religious, by their involvement in the educational system, sisters such as the Presentations also contributed to the socialisation of their charges into the dominant social and cultural values of the time. As they were especially committed to the education of young female children, the Presentation nuns participated in the transmission of the type of intellectual and vocational training considered appropriate for girls and young women at that time. Therefore they were involved in the transmission of gendered social roles. In this they represented something of a paradox, for here were all-female institutions, governed on a day-to-day basis by women who socialised girls into domestic and dependent roles.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, given their role within the Catholic church which was itself male dominated, contemporaries saw no contradiction in the nuns' transmission of values that they themselves seemed to transgress. From the 1850s onwards, and especially by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was generally accepted in Ireland that respectable women were

those who married and remained faithful and subordinate within the marriage relationship, who accepted that their natural sphere was the domestic one and who remained sexually continent until marriage.⁽¹¹⁾ By transmitting these values the educational project of the Presentation nuns in Limerick had effects that went far beyond the alleviation of educational need.

II

The new Catholic institutions such as the Presentation convents were situated, on the whole, in the cities and provincial towns. There is a direct link between urbanisation and the appearance of convents, for in the larger urban areas there existed a concentration of prosperous Catholics (both business and professional people) who had enough money to found and maintain convents and were willing to do so. Some of these Catholics gave a great deal of their wealth towards religious and philanthropic work.⁽¹²⁾ The agents of this work were the nuns and brothers of the various convents

and monasteries whose members were socially active. In Limerick, although the Christian Brothers had been here since 1816, the first socially active female order to arrive and to stay was the Presentation order in 1837. In terms of convent foundation, this was rather late in the century for the first permanent foundation in one of the major urban areas in Ireland. By that year there were thirty-three Presentation convents in all - most of them in towns considerably smaller than Limerick. It was not the first attempt at a foundation however. As early as 1810, the Presentation community in Kilkenny sent an unspecified number of sisters to Limerick but they only stayed two months in the city, as they encountered too many difficulties. Unfortunately, the records available do not tell us the nature of these difficulties. Bishop Young of Limerick was very frustrated by this failure: in a letter to his fellow bishop of Cork he hoped that the disappointment would only be temporary.⁽¹³⁾ He did not allow his desire for education for the Catholic poor of the city to be long denied however, for in 1812 he managed to persuade three Poor Clares to come to Limerick and open a school. This foundation struggled along until 1831, at which point financial difficulties became insurmountable.⁽¹⁴⁾ In May, 1833, four nuns from the Presentation community in Galway took over the running of the school for poor female children that had been established by the Poor Clare nuns in St Mary's Parish. These nuns were recalled in April, 1836, as they had not attracted any recruits and the location of the convent had proved unhealthy. Interestingly enough, Samuel Lewis wrote that the school they subsequently abandoned was put into the national school system and run by two of the sisters of St Clare, who had obviously remained behind after the withdrawal of their community.⁽¹⁵⁾

This whole series of events tells us much about the vagaries of convent foundation at that time but also gives us an insight into the haphazard but nonetheless successful attempt at providing education for the poor female children of Limerick. From what evidence is available, it appears that the lack of financial support from the citizens of Limerick coupled with the orders' inability to support the various attempts were the crucial factors in the failure of these foundations. This financial insecurity would have had a knock-on effect, for a house in a financially precarious position would not attract local recruits which in turn would further undermine its viability. This is emphasised by the fact that financial security proved to be the key to the first successful foundation in Limerick in the pre-famine period.

This foundation came about as a result of an invitation issued to the sisters in the South Presentation Convent, Cork City, by Catherine Maria King. King had been engaged in running a school for poor children in St Michael's parish, in conjunction with her friend and adviser, Fr

Hogan PP. She had an interesting background for she had been born in 1785 in Waterford of wealthy Protestant parents. On the death of her father, she came to live in Limerick with Captain and Mrs Moore of Patrick Street as she was a grandniece of the latter. Mrs Moore was a Catholic who was instrumental in King's subsequent conversion to that religion. In 1826, she entered the monastic Convent of the Visitation of Shepton Mallet, Somerset. She became a novice in December of that year (at the age of 41) but left either in 1827 or 1828. When King returned to Limerick, she began her work in St Michael's female parochial school but after some years both she and Fr Hogan became very anxious to place this initiative on a permanent footing - hence the already mentioned invitation. Fr Hogan gave a house adjoining St Michael's presbytery, built at a cost of £3,000, and schools costing £1,300 were also built at his expense. The house, schools, and the ground they stood on were transferred to King's ownership while the negotiations with the South Presentation Convent were being completed. In addition, on the death of her uncle and aunt, King became sole heir to their estate and was thus in a position to ensure the financial viability of the initiative. With all these arrangements in place, the sisters from South Presentation Convent came to Limerick.

On 8 May, 1837, M. Joseph Harnett, M. Stanislaus Drinan and M. Francis Cantillan arrived in Limerick. The first named was the superior and had an interesting background in terms of the Limerick foundation. Both she and her sister, who were natives of Castleisland, Co. Kerry, had joined the South Presentation community specifically for the Limerick mission in the early 1820s. Clearly, a foundation was contemplated at that time although it never materialised. Unfortunately, the second sister died in 1833 of tuberculosis and it was left to Joseph Harnett to fulfil their ambition, along with her two companions. The arrival of the three nuns was marked by a short paragraph two days later in the local establishment newspaper, the *Limerick Chronicle*:

On Saturday evening three ladies from the South Presentation Convent, Cork, accompanied by Dr Murphy, Roman Catholic Bishop of that diocese, arrived here, for the purpose of founding a branch of their order, for the instruction of poor children. There is a handsome house and spacious schoolroom erected for that purpose in Sexton-St. which later will contain 500 children.

The schools were opened on 29 May and the first pupils admitted were the one hundred and fifty poor girls whom King had been teaching. By the end of the year, the number in the school had increased to some 340 pupils, according to the *Limerick Chronicle* of 29 November. It further detailed what the sisters had achieved over the previous five months:

340 girls daily receive the blessings of gratuitous instruction; which includes, not only a religious and moral education, but also reading, writing, arithmetic, and every sort of useful work. The children are supplied with all of the materials necessary for the different branches of Education, and the more destitute among them, with such clothing as the funds of the convent can afford.

The emphasis on the moral education of the young girls as well as the material provision for the students is worth noting.

Both the Presentation community and its work continued to expand over the next few years, so much so that a Presentation nun in Dublin could write in early 1839 that "the success of the dear sisters in Limerick is very gratifying, so many having failed there, although their names are unknown".⁽¹⁶⁾ Numbers in the school continued to rise and several young women joined the sisters in their work. According to the *Catholic Directory* of 1840, there were twelve sisters in the community in that year. The community thrived so much that after four and a half years two of the founding sisters (the exception being Harnett) returned to the South Presentation Convent. King, who had been living in the convent (as was her prerogative as founder), joined in 1840 and subsequently became superior in 1848. The convent and its doings very quickly became part of the fabric of Catholic life in Limerick. Reports on the occasions of receptions and professions featured frequently in local newspapers, and in these the "highly respectable and very crowded [congregations]" and "exquisite ... and impressive ceremonies" were described.⁽¹⁷⁾ Thus within a short period of time, the effects of the community were noticeable. The young female poor of Limerick were obviously benefiting directly by its provision of education. The wealthy supported its endeavours by financial aid, praised its work, attended its ceremonies and sometimes gave their daughters to join more fully in this Catholic philanthropy. A vocation to the Presentation Convent came to be regarded with a great deal of approbation by contemporaries, as the writer of the following piece, musing on the reception of a Miss Bridget Quin in the *Limerick Reporter* on 6 October, 1840, indicates:

How delightful must be the feelings of Mr. Quin, this night, to reflect that he has located his daughter where the dangers and vicissitudes of life have no access, and in the society of ladies whose whole lives are devoted, as her own will be, to piety and the cultivation of morality and religion in the minds of the poor, female children of our city.

This represented a very satisfactory situation in this contemporary's view: the haven of the convent would provide the environment from which this young lady could inculcate appropriate religious and social mores in less fortunate females.

The work for these poor female children continued apace. Besides providing education and clothing for the very destitute, by 1840 it was customary to give breakfasts to thirty poor girls. The community also managed to send three sisters to establish a foundation in Castleisland, Co. Kerry in 1846, one of the three being the original superior and Castleisland woman, M. Joseph Harnett. However as Hutch, an early chronicler of the Presentation order, wrote (quoting almost verbatim from the contemporary annals):

The time chosen for their departure was the commencement of a period of great trials and additional labours for the nuns in Limerick, who, like their sisters elsewhere, were forced to exhaust their ingenuity in devising means to supply with food the unfortunate children whom they saw daily famishing at their door during the winter of 1846-47. During this period of sore distress the good nuns were enabled to supply food every day to 150 poor children, and also to clothe very many of them, through the charity of some generous persons ...⁽¹⁸⁾

This work was only possible because of the generosity of the sisters' wealthy fellow-Catholics who contributed both to the famine relief and to the educational endeavour. However, the sisters were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their schools in these circumstances, for in 1848 the schools were put into the national education system. That step was obviously not taken lightly as the Presentation approach to education and that of the National Board were not exactly compatible.

III

The Presentation Sisters in Limerick conducted an educational system whose philosophy was abundantly clear. The Presentation Constitution stated that

The Sisters must ... have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of this Institute, that is, a most serious application to the Instruction of poor female children in the principles of Religion and Christian Piety.⁽¹⁹⁾

The nuns wished to produce young Catholics, knowledgeable about their faith, effectively attached to it, and committed to the Christian transformation of the world. For young women, it was generally accepted that their most important contribution to this transformation would occur within the domestic sphere, but this wish was coupled with a desire to provide a sound vocational and academic training for the nuns' young female charges. The sisters were well aware of the poverty of their pupils and of the need to equip them, in so far as they could, with the skills that would enable them to earn a livelihood. They also endeavoured to provide them with a



Part of the Presentation Convent and grounds.

rudimentary literary education, that is instruction in the '3 Rs'. An appeal for financial aid for the nuns in the *Limerick Reporter* on 20 November, 1840, stated that

456 poor female children are daily instructed in the principles of religion and morality - they are also taught those branches of education and industry suited to their conditions in life and likely to prove so beneficial to themselves and the society of which they will form so considerable a portion.

Limerick society was acutely aware of the benefits accruing from the education of its poorer members:

The progress of society has brought with it no other influence so intimately connected with the purity and integrity of public morals, as the early training of the female mind to purity and to virtue, especially amongst those who, from their condition in life, are destined to be the wives and mothers of people ...⁽²⁰⁾

proclaimed a contemporary newspaper editorial, urging support for the Limerick Presentation schools. Female responsibility for the handing on of morality, not only to other females but to males as well, is clearly seen by the suggestion that their most important role was as the "wives and mothers of people" - male people, one

presumes! This coincided perfectly with the broader social project of that period for it seems that by "impressing on [the young] a horror for vice, and the love of virtue, and by instructing them in the duties of religion"⁽²¹⁾ the nuns would help achieve the great end of making the poor "worthy members of the great family of mankind".⁽²²⁾

Though contemporaries greeted such civilising effects of the sisters' education with much approbation, it must always be borne in mind that religious conviction was the nuns' motivating force. As religious, their first duty was the sanctification of their own souls. As members of the Presentation order the instruction of poor female children in the principles of religion and Christian piety was the chief means to that end. Though the children were to be instructed in secular subjects, religious instruction and guidance formed the pivot around which school life revolved:

[The sisters] shall teach the children to offer themselves up to God from the first use of Reason and when they awake in the morning, to raise their hearts to him; adore his Sovereign Majesty, return thanks to him for all his favours, and arm themselves with the sign of the Cross. They shall instruct them how to offer all their thoughts, words and actions to God's glory, implore his grace to know and love him, and to fulfil his

Commandments - how they are to examine their consciences every night, and to honour and respect their Parents. They shall teach them how to prepare for Confession, and to confess their sins with all sincerity and contrition: They shall be ever attentive to dispose them for the Sacrament of Confirmation, and for their First Communion.⁽²³⁾

The sisters were further admonished that it was a duty incumbent upon them to teach the catechism daily to the children, which they were to "explain to them briefly and simply, adapting their language to the [children's] age and capacity."⁽²⁴⁾ This suggests that the sisters were aware that the pace of each child's development varied and so endeavoured to adapt their teaching method to the needs of individual pupils.

However, although the sisters had some enlightened ideas such as awareness of individual learning needs, their teaching methods were very much products of their period. The teachers were to be careful "not to allow [the children] to be over curious in their questions, but to constantly exhort them to captivate their understanding in obedience to faith".⁽²⁵⁾ The sisters can hardly be faulted for an uncreative approach to education however, when it was the norm at the time. They used the educational systems and ideas then in vogue. Evidently Presentation Sisters were



The impressive Presentation parlour, with its ornamental fireplace and fine furniture.

influenced by the Lancastrian system with its use of monitors and strong emphasis on rote learning. They also borrowed extensively from the Ursuline tradition of education. Features such as the superior's final responsibility for the school with various duties delegated to individual sisters, are adequate testimony to this.⁽²⁶⁾ For all that, the Presentation Sisters brought their own special charism or mission to bear on the task of educating the poor in Limerick, in line with the particular characteristic of the Institute, that is, the instruction of poor female children.

However, the way in which the Presentation ethos of education developed was shaped not only by the Presentation nuns themselves but also by the interests of the secular state in which they lived. The state controlled national system of elementary education in Ireland had been established in 1831. The schools, curricula, teaching systems and administrative machinery put in place then became the foundation of popular education in Ireland for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Each order or convent had to decide whether or not to have their schools participate in the system for although the financial gains were considerable, it had a philosophy very different to that of any Catholic teaching congregation, particularly that of the Presentation order which has just been examined.

The state supported primary school system under the control of a state board of commissioners had as its primary aim the dissemination of literacy and numeracy in the general population of Ireland.⁽²⁷⁾ This was very different from the teaching of the principles of religion and Christian piety that was the avowed aim of the Presentation nuns' educational endeavour. In fact, the national school system was to be strictly non-denominational by drawing a distinction between secular and religious subjects, and to this end "opportunities [were] to be afforded to the children of each school for receiving such religious instruction as their parents or guardians [approved] of". Such instruction could "be given during the fixed school day or otherwise".⁽²⁸⁾ Public prayer and all other religious exercises were subject to the same control. The board also refused to allow any religious emblems to be displayed in the classrooms. All of this was anathema to a Presentation sister: for her there could be no divorce between religious and secular education. Moreover when the qualities required of a teacher in the national school system are examined, another difference between its philosophy and that of the Presentation nuns is evident. The Commissioners of National Education desired teachers to be persons of "Christian sentiment, of calm temper, and discretion ... imbued with a spirit of peace, of obedience to the law, and of

loyalty to [the] Sovereign, ... [possessing] the art of communicating knowledge, but ... capable of moulding the mind of youth'.⁽²⁹⁾ Although these characteristics enabled a teacher to fulfil admirably the intellectual and social functions of the educational system, they fell far short of the fervour and zeal required of a Presentation nun.

Despite the tensions between the two philosophies, many convent schools were forced to enter the national school system, as was the establishment in Sexton Street. Hutch, writing in the 1870s, made the reason abundantly clear:

Up to the year 1848, the Sexton Street Presentation schools received no state aid whatsoever; but the great difficulty of obtaining sufficient funds for the efficient working of such a large establishment at that period of almost unprecedented poverty and depression in Ireland, induced the nuns to accept the government grant and place their schools in connection with the Board of National Education.⁽³⁰⁾

The nuns in Limerick in 1848, forced by financial need to accept association with the board for the sake of the financial benefits, were now obliged to work as best they could within its restrictions.

However acceptance into the system was not automatic; application had to be made and the schools examined by a



O'Connell Street at the turn of the century.

board inspector. These reports provide much information on the Sexton Street schools prior to their absorption into the national system. The first point to be noted with respect to entry is that the sisters proceeded very cautiously. They placed part of their school in association with the board in 1848, another part in 1849 and the final part in 1850. Doubtless they were testing the system and judging how compatible it was with their own philosophy of education. Many interesting facts emerge from the reports, for example the number of students present at the times of inspections was 498 pupils and the premises were in a good state of repair. It also appears that £75 a year was raised for the school by means of a charity sermon (a very popular method of fundraising at that time). The school was furnished with all teaching requirements according to the inspector and the national book scheme had been used for the previous three years: Books I, II, III and IV were in use. The teachers were the "ladies of the community", Mrs [sic] King being the superior by this time. Although the inspectors thought their literary acquirements, character and method of conducting the school were good, the nuns had received no instruction in the art of teaching - though "Mrs King once visited the Model School in Dublin". Naturally, the school was gratuitous, scholars being clothed and fed as well as educated. Overall, the inspector concluded in 1848 that having "examined two classes I found the pupils good readers and remarkably intelligent. They performed the usual calculations with care and exactness and altogether the school appeared zealously and efficiently conducted."⁽³¹⁾

IV

So the educational endeavour pioneered by Catherine Maria King, with the support of Fr Hogan, which was then transferred to the Presentation Sisters, eventually became part of the official state system. How did the nuns and their pupils fare in that system? To answer this, it is useful to move forward in time some thirty years, for a number of reasons. The expansion of the schools in 1865 and the death of the founder, Catherine Maria King, in 1866, marked the end of an era in the history of the Presentation Convent and schools in Limerick. The girls attending the schools in the 1860s were possibly the daughters of the original Sexton Street pupils, so it is an opportune point at which to analyse the efficacy of the Presentation Sisters' educational endeavours. Moreover, the holding of two government inquiries into aspects of education between 1864 and 1870 (the former commenting in detail on the Sexton Street establishment) generated much useful information and commentary.

For some, such as W. Hutch, the Sexton Street schools had achieved nothing but good since its foundation:

The Presentation nuns have been now nearly forty years established in the city of the 'Violated Treaty', and it would indeed be difficult to estimate properly the immense good which they have achieved within that period. The matrons of the Limerick of today were their pupils forty years ago, and their pupils of today will be the mothers of the next generation of Limerick men. And who shall venture to measure the powerful influence of these thousands of

religiously-educated young Irishwomen, on their own domestic circle and on society at large, not in Ireland alone, but in all those vast countries to which the Irish emigrate?⁽³²⁾

The common understanding of the use to which female education was to be put is very evident in Hutch's sentiments. Their impact on their male offspring and on their domestic circle is to the fore: it is the moral and religious legacy of the Sexton Street education that will last, literally to the ends of the earth.

In assessing their legacy in more prosaic terms, it must be noted that the Presentation school would have helped reduce the level of illiteracy in Limerick City. Thousands of young girls had passed through the schools from 1837 onwards. From the various sources available, the present author makes the conservative estimate that, between 1837 and 1870, somewhere in the region of 16,000 girls received education in Sexton Street. All of these would have been given a rudimentary literary education (some with more success than others, of course). Though not the only educational agency working in the city during those decades, the Presentation convent would have been among those helping to reduce the overall illiteracy figures. According to the censuses held in 1841 and 1861, the percentage of the population of Limerick City aged five years and upwards who were illiterate fell from 42% in the former year to 33% in the latter. Mere figures alone do not tell the whole story, of course. Though doubtless helping in the dissemination of basic numeracy and literacy among the poor of Limerick, some government reports were sharply critical

of the standard of education reached in the Sexton Street school. Moreover they were not slow to point out what they saw as the cause of the poor standards.

Head Inspector Sheridan, for instance, whose district encompassed Limerick City, firmly believed that the root of the problem lay in the fact that the nuns received no technical training as teachers. Writing in 1860, he deplored their "limited acquaintance with those improved methods of teaching and school organisation which have received the sanction of experience".⁽³³⁾ The commissioners of National Education accepted the situation where nuns were not classified or required to submit to an examination as they took it for granted "that they [were] sufficiently well-educated to discharge the duties of National teachers efficiently".⁽³⁴⁾ Funding was actually paid to the school as a capitation allowance, the amount dependant on the average daily attendance at the school. This differed from the system of examination and classification of the ordinary national school teachers: they were paid a given salary if they reached a certain standard in the state examination.

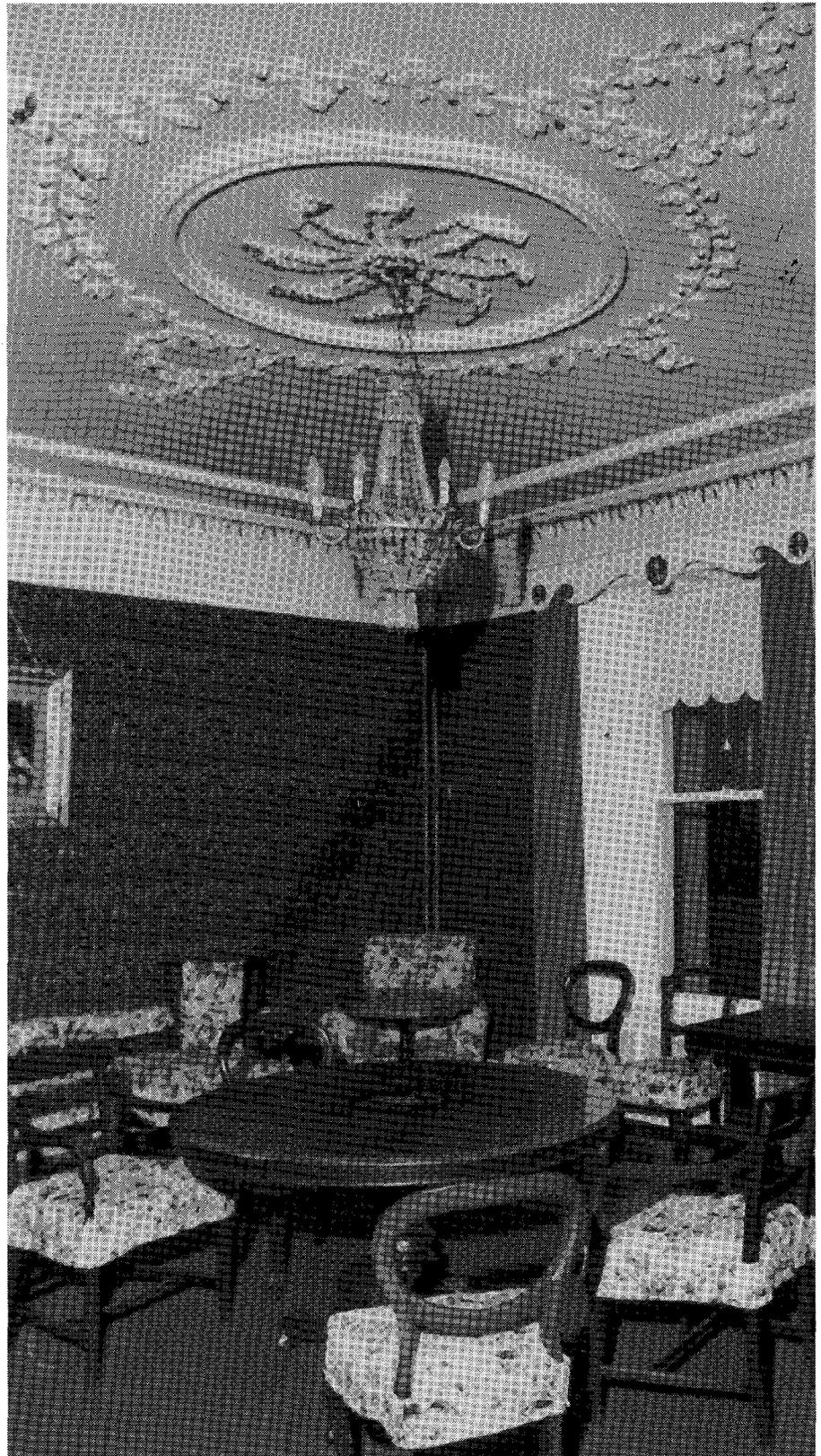
Such a variation in the system of payment of salary was bound to create differences in the approach to teaching of the two groups. The ordinary national teachers had a far greater incentive to reach the standards set down by the National Board of Education and, in fact, did far better financially than the nuns in the end. If they had agreed to examination and classification, the nuns would have received far more than they did by way of capitation. However, they clearly considered it far more important to retain some measure of independence within the state's educational bureaucracy.

However Sheridan's report was not totally damning of the nuns' work in the classroom. Writing generally of the convent schools in his district, he reported that

... it is undeniable that the majority of the nuns ... are infinitely better educated than the teachers of ordinary National schools, while it is equally true that they bring to the discharge of their duties a disinterestedness and devotedness to which even the most zealous of the lay teachers can have no claim. It is also undeniable that their schools do an incalculable amount of good. Their pupils receive a moral and religious training of the highest order, they are educated to habits of truth-telling, modesty, order and cleanliness ...⁽³⁵⁾

So, according to Sheridan, the fact of not being interested in the salary scale applicable to ordinary national schools resulted in the qualities of disinterest and devotion in the discharge of their duties so evident in the nuns. These qualities no doubt sprang from their sense of vocation.

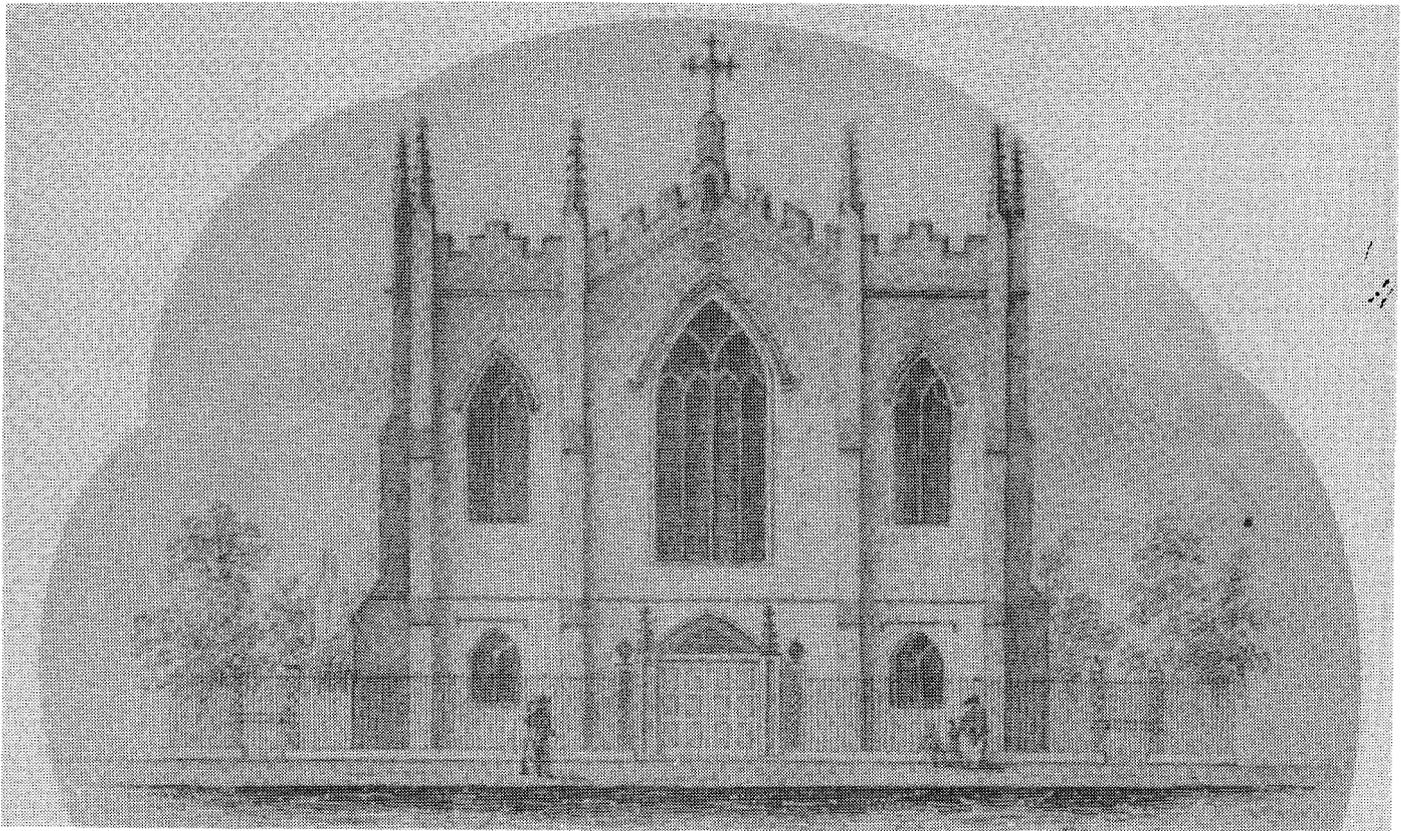
When we consider District Inspector Andrew O'Callaghan's report of 1864 which dealt specifically with Sexton Street school, the problems mentioned in the



Part of the parlour of the Presentation Convent, Sexton Street, showing the ceiling's decorative plasterwork.

previous report come into sharper focus. O'Callaghan castigated the standard of teaching of the nuns. Though the literary acquirements of the nuns were quite satisfactory, "their method of teaching [was] defective and their organising skill [was] very imperfect". Judging by results obtained, the efficiency of instruction was "very unsatisfactory", he held - except in reading and writing. Few left school having obtained a satisfactory degree

of education, in his opinion, as "the information imparted [was] very defective, except in reading and writing". So, while the higher literary accomplishments of the pupils did not meet with O'Callaghan's approval, at least the basics of reading and writing were being dealt with adequately. The same ambivalence was evident in O'Callaghan's comments on the teaching of younger pupils. Although he argued that the intellectual training of the infants



St. Saviour's Church, Glentworth Street.

failed "to produce the results which [were] expected to be developed in a skilfully conducted infant school", "the infant pupils [were] cared for with loving solicitude".⁽³⁶⁾ It was obvious, even to O'Callaghan, that he and the sisters were viewing their efficacy from very different angles:

Notwithstanding that the teachers of this school are undoubtedly influenced by high and holy motives to extend the blessings of a sound, religious, moral and secular education, in the locality in which they teach, I am obliged to assent, that their efforts have fallen very far short of the results to be desired, as far as secular instruction is concerned ...⁽³⁷⁾

It must be borne in mind, however, that O'Callaghan, as a member of the Established Church, would have had very little sympathy with conventual institutions. Notwithstanding this, it is probably true to say that the standard of purely secular education was lower in the Sexton Street school (as in many convent schools) than in many ordinary national schools. Fervour and zeal by themselves were not sufficient to compensate for the technical training as teachers that the Presentation nuns' lay colleagues received.

However, he made a further charge in his report that is far more interesting in terms of our attempt to assess the Presentation sisters' efficacy in their mission to teach the poor. He asserted that the nuns had "not succeeded in any marked manner, in rescuing from total ignorance the children belonging to the more destitute classes".⁽³⁸⁾ This is a very

damning assessment if the actual aims of the congregation are borne in mind. O'Callaghan's answer to the question as to the effect of the school in drawing out from their homes and bringing under the influence of instruction those children of the more destitute classes who would otherwise probably attend no school, is therefore worth quoting in full:

This school has had little or no effect in this way. This may be accounted for, in my opinion, by the fact that the nuns of the Presentation Order are forbidden, by a 'vow of enclosure', to go outside the bounds of their convent. They have, therefore, no external intercourse with people. On examining the Register, under the head of "Occupation of Parents" I observed that a very large proportion of the parents were engaged in some trade, or as clerks, pensioners etc. There is a distribution of bread for luncheon every day to about fifty children, and this number may be fixed on as representing the more destitute, and about thirty but for this dole might not be sent to school at all.⁽³⁹⁾

It is ironic to note that Nano Nagle, founder of the Presentation order, would have had great sympathy with O'Callaghan's view that the rule of enclosure hindered the efficacy of the sisters' work. She had never wanted enclosure and had founded her order when the Ursulines had proved a disappointment in that area. It was only after her death that papal enclosure had been adopted by the congregation. There can be no doubt that an inability to minister to the poor in their own homes

and localities hampered the sisters' work, in that they were forced to wait for the poor to come to them. But come they did, as is evidenced from O'Callaghan's passing comment about the children fed daily. It is obvious also from his remarks that the school catered to a very wide social spectrum. A large proportion of the pupils, according to him, were the children of tradespeople and clerks; however it is noteworthy that the poor continued to attend, although not in the majority. The Presentation nuns were anxious to provide education for all who needed it at the lower end of the social scale, whether that be for the destitute, working classes or lower middle classes.

So while some credence may be given to the complaints of O'Callaghan in 1864, the situation was not as bad as he painted it. Other contemporaries put a less negative interpretation on matters than he. While taking cognisance of the type of defects commented on by O'Callaghan, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education in Ireland (Powis Commission) of 1870, for instance, was generally approving of convent schools:

The good qualities of convent schools are evidently due to the religious and moral influence of the nuns. That there should be some deficiency in secular instruction is not at all surprising. It is most unreasonable to conclude that a person who has a religious vocation will be necessarily fitted to teach secular subjects ... Piety and devotion are admirable qualifications for guiding the minds of young people in the highest aspect of education, but do not make up for the want of professional training, and of

technical instruction in the art of teaching.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Thus the lack of formal teacher training was a problem all convent schools suffered - it was not just the Sexton Street school alone. Despite that lack, the "highest aspect of education" was not being neglected as the sisters had all the qualities necessary to guide the young people in their charge, in their personal development and on the road to social improvement, an aim much desired by the state.

In providing this guidance the Presentation Sisters acted in common with all other teaching sisters. Were they perceived by the state as making any distinctive contribution? One of the assistant commissioners involved in the 1870 inquiry certainly thought so:

The teaching seems to me very good on the whole. In all the schools [the Presentation sisters] did a great deal of the drudgery connected with the classes ... Of one part of the education I can hardly estimate the effect, namely, the personal character and example of the nuns on their pupils. But this should certainly be taken into account and my own feeling is that it would be hard to exaggerate its benefits to the children in later life.⁽⁴¹⁾

Here is an impact that was far less tangible (though not less real) than the standard of formal, secular education achieved by the children. Through the school, the Presentation nuns attempted to share their particular Catholic vision of life and prepare their students for living. To this end, it is interesting to note that the standard of industrial instruction (which after all was the most practical form of education the sisters could have given to prepare their students for life after school) was extremely high in the Sexton Street establishment. Even O'Callaghan, in an otherwise extremely critical report, was forced to admit that the educational value of the industrial instruction in the school was "superior" to that of ordinary girls' schools in Limerick city.⁽⁴²⁾ According to the Powis Commission c. 55% of the pupils were learning the various branches of female industry in 1870 - a very creditable figure if the younger pupils are excluded. This amounted to 340 girls engaged in 'vocational' preparation. The gendered nature of the industrial instruction is evident when the actual skills being acquired are noted, for instance all were learning sewing and in addition 120 were learning knitting, Netting, embroidery and cutting out only attracted 20, 30 and 24 students respectively.⁽⁴³⁾ The versatility of these skills is immediately evident: not only would they be indispensable for those types of employments considered most appropriate for the female half of the population (such as domestic service), but they would prove invaluable in the future domestic roles that were considered to be the lot of most young women.

Moreover this was not the only type of vocational preparation conducted in the school for, as mentioned above, the Presentation used monitors in their schools who had to be trained and who received a salary for their work in most cases. From the beginning of the 1850s the state was paying salaries to Sexton Street monitors. By then the school was also receiving payments for the training of monitors.⁽⁴⁴⁾ That being said, there were continuous complaints about the standards attained by the monitors in the school. The general school registers regularly made mention of the inadequacies of the training these young women received, for example:

February 21 1862

No gratuity for training Mary Anne Boucher. Teachers' attention called to bad writing and spelling, and unsatisfactory answering of the monitor.

No gratuity for K. Slattery.

Special attention to be given to instruction of monitors.⁽⁴⁵⁾

This made clear that the responsibility for training these 'student teachers' lay with the nuns and as far as the inspector was concerned, they had failed in their charge. The 1864 report was also critical. O'Callaghan held that the acquirements of the monitors were not satisfactory and that the efficiency of their services as junior instructors was only tolerably fair. He further charged that the level of preparation they received from the nuns was totally inadequate:

They receive every day, along with a class of unpaid monitors, instruction for 2¼ hours in the subjects of their programme, but they have received little or no direction in the art of teaching, because this subject is but very imperfectly understood by the teachers themselves.⁽⁴⁶⁾

It must be borne in mind that the reservations expressed earlier vis-a-vis O'Callaghan's attitude towards the nuns are still applicable for it is again at the teaching skills of the sisters that he is again directing his criticisms. If he were unhappy with their teaching of ordinary pupils, he would hardly be satisfied at their instruction of monitors. His lack of sympathy with conventual schools is further underlined when he wrote:

With respect to the training of teachers, the school trains 5 or 6 every year, who are sent abroad to India and America, and become nuns in convents belonging to the Presentation Order. But I must say that these persons have received an imperfect training for the efficient performance of their duty, as far as regards the teaching of the secular branches of a school course.⁽⁴⁷⁾

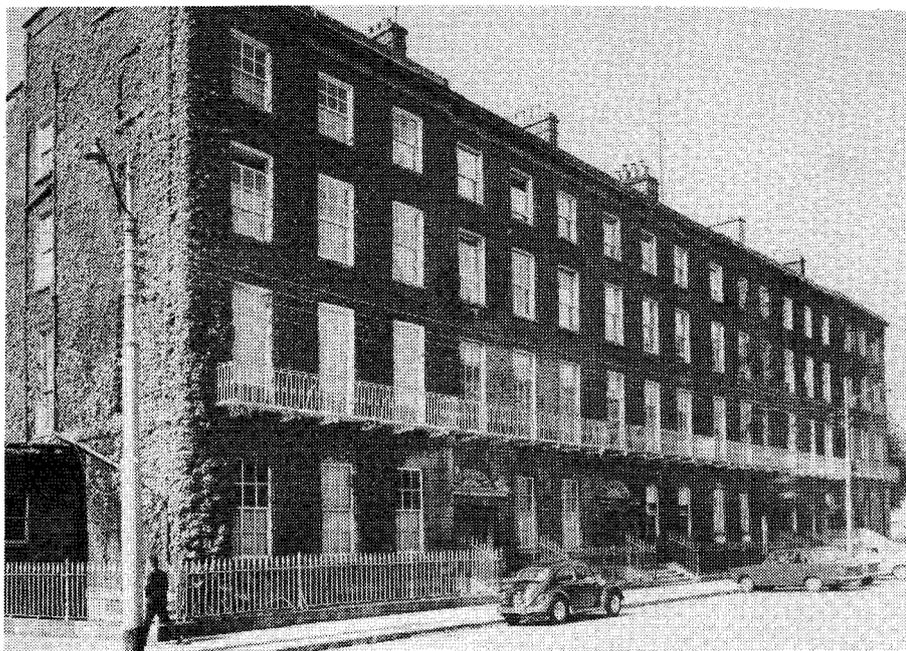
It is interesting to note that the nuns placed young women as monitors in their schools in order to prepare them for missionary work: recruitment was

evidently very healthy. Unfortunately, the records do not make it clear whether the future nuns were the paid or unpaid monitors mentioned in the reports. What is clear from our analysis of both the national system's philosophy and the nuns' educational ethos that the latter would not have been dismayed at the above poor assessment of their proficiency with regards to secular education. Their priorities lay elsewhere, even more so in respect to the training of monitors who would themselves become nuns. It must also be noted that comments about the nuns' lack of training in the arts of teaching were made in the context of the Catholic church's boycott of the state teacher-training system then in place, namely the model schools. That the official inspectorate should constantly harp on about deficiencies in this regard is not surprising as it was very much a political issue.

It must be further noted that contemporaries held few such misgivings, witness Hutch:

... one of the best tests of the value of the training given in the Sexton-street Presentation Schools is the success which attends their pupils in after life. Besides very many who are comfortably and respectably married, numbers of them are at present filling offices as governnesses, teachers or assistants in schools, telegraph and post office clerks etc. They are to be met with in every quarter of the globe and are found to give everywhere the most unqualified satisfaction.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The priority that Hutch accords the domestic role of women and by extension, the value he placed on the appropriate training the students of Sexton Street received for that role, accorded very well with the dominant perception of the 'respectable' woman. His praise is adequate testimony to the efficacy of the sisters' efforts in this respect. Although as a priest of the Catholic church and a staunch admirer of Nagle and her followers, Hutch may be accused of a certain bias in favour of the Sexton Street school, in fact, he was not alone in his praise. O'Callaghan, who certainly could not be accused of favouritism, acknowledged that "the nuns have done a good service to the cause of national education".⁽⁴⁹⁾ Chief Inspector Laurie in his report on the schools in Limerick City in 1870, is fulsome in his praise of the six convent schools then existing: "The Roman Catholic communities have alone redeemed the city ... from the reproach of being a hotbed of vice and ignorance"⁽⁵⁰⁾ and further the schools were "free from the blemishes of the ordinary National School". He believed the schools to be doing good work and found the "aggregate results of instruction" very much to his satisfaction. Of course 'aggregate results' do not tell us of those students who failed within the system, those whose educational standards fell



Tontine houses in Pery Square, built in 1840.

below what was considered appropriate. Neither do these records tell us about those students who did not benefit from the sisters' moral and religious training. The surviving comment focuses on the positive aspects of the nuns' work, in the style of Laurie who noted that

The points of superiority - which is, after all, a proof of culture on the part of the managing staff - are: manners and discipline, organisation, cleanliness, ventilation, sprightliness and cheerfulness.⁽⁵¹⁾

These are characteristics wholly appropriate to a citizen of the United Kingdom at that time, particularly if that citizen were female. Clearly the 'culture' which was judged to be intrinsic to the Presentation nuns was being passed on to their pupils in the form of the qualities enumerated above. Even the state inspectorate appreciated and approved of the transference to these young women of appropriate attitudes and behaviours such as discipline and organisation. The past students of Sexton Street were ones that not alone were a credit to their religious and moral training but also to the socialisation they had received which helped make them 'worthy members of the great family of mankind'.

We have seen how the Presentation nuns in Limerick participated in the transformation of Irish society in the nineteenth century. They helped consolidate the position of the Catholic church by means of their educational endeavours. By doing this they were also helping their charges experience the benefits of 'The Constitution' and more particularly were aiding their female pupils acquire the ideological and practical attributes deemed necessary for a fitting and (if they were lucky) a fulfilled existence. The convent and its school became part of Limerick life and its

citizens expressed appreciation and approval for the benign effects which accrued from the sisters' work. The state educational system in which they operated was often critical of the standards attained in secular education in the school, blaming in particular a lack of teacher-training for deficiencies in this regard. However, the quality of care of their students, the calibre of the basic literary education provided and the superiority of the industrial instruction given in the school were all singled out for praise by the official inspectorate and given the nuns' priorities, this must count for much. Moreover all agreed that in the transmission of the "highest aspect of education" the Presentation nuns had no rival, their religious and moral teaching was without parallel.

The educational endeavours of the nuns were bearing fruit for the state, for the Catholic church, and of course for those girls and young women who were in their charge. Naturally the nuns were not perfect; their methods of teaching were not the best either for their pupils or monitors and their effectiveness was undoubtedly hindered by the enclosed nature of their lives. Nevertheless, during the thirty or so years from the foundation of the convent to the Powis Commission they achieved a great deal of good, for in those years they fed, clothed and educated a proportion of the female population of Limerick who would otherwise have lacked those benefits. In so doing, they provided role models for their young students, inspired many to join them in their continuing educational mission and without argument, improved the quality of life for many in the city of Limerick.

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