

# The Presentation Order and the National School System in Limerick, 1837-1870

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*This paper traces the involvement of the Presentation Order in education in Limerick City between 1837 and 1870. It begins by outlining the initial circumstances which brought the nuns to Limerick in 1837 and examines why the schools they ran became associated with the National Board at the end of 1840s. This leads to a comparison of the philosophies pervading the National schools and the Presentation Order's educational establishments. Finally, contemporary evidence is used to assess the style of education offered by the sisters.*

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The Presentation Order<sup>1</sup> has an impressive history of involvement in education in Limerick City since pre-Famine times. What follows will focus on the initial involvement of the sisters in education, from 1837 to 1870. Though the nuns established an independent school at Sexton Street, financial circumstances forced them to have their schools taken in connection with the National Board of Education at the end of the 1840s. It is interesting to explore the type of education offered in the schools for, as might be expected, the Presentation nuns and the National Board had very different philosophies of education. More unexpectedly, perhaps, they had a good deal in common, for both systems aimed ultimately, as the title of this paper suggests, at fitting the poor to be "worthy members of the Great family of Mankind".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this was how contemporary society in Limerick viewed the sisters' educational endeavours. This theme will be explored, firstly, by outlining the context in which they arrived; secondly, by comparing the educational philosophies of the Presentation Order and the National Board; and finally by assessing, from contemporary evidence, the style of education which resulted from the interplay of the two.

It was a widely held belief in the nineteenth century that one of the main factors which made for the unhealthy condition of Irish economic and social life and the concomitant social distress of the Irish masses was the lack of education of the latter. It was felt that their ignorance not only hindered practical schemes for the improvement of the condition of the masses 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 'civilizing' the Irish.<sup>3</sup> So, in 1831, the National Board of Education was set up to establish a universal, state system of elementary education.

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<sup>1</sup> Although strictly speaking, the term 'nun' refers to a member of a female religious 'order' who takes solemn vows, and the term 'sister' refers to a member of a female religious 'congregation' who takes simple vows, the distinction is not widely applied in everyday language. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the terms 'nun' and 'sister' and 'order' and 'congregation' are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 6 July 1841.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine 1798-1848*, Dublin 1972, p. 98.



The state supported primary school system under the control of the state board of commissioners had as its primary aim the dissemination of literacy and numeracy among the general population of Ireland.<sup>14</sup> This was a far cry from the principles of religion and christian piety which was the avowed aim of the Presentation Sisters' endeavour. In fact, the National school system was to be strictly non-denominational by drawing a distinction between secular and religious instruction, and to this end as the 'Rules and Regulations' of the commissioners said:

opportunities [were] to be afforded to [the children for] receiving such religious instruction as their parents or guardians [approved] of.<sup>15</sup>

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. This proved a constant source of tension in the Limerick school, as the registers preserved in the National Archives prove. One incident will serve to illustrate this problem: in January 1855 instructions were issued to have a large picture of the 'Virgin and Child' removed as its presence in a state school was objectionable.

The books used in the National School system contained a strong moralistic and socialising aura and urged acceptance of the prevailing social, economic and political value system. Great chunks of moral platitudes were forced upon the children during the hours of combined instruction; but these homilies were of a sort upon which all denominations could agree.<sup>16</sup> As such they were not totally unacceptable. After all, the sisters were part of that movement fitting the poorer classes for their place in the great family of mankind. Regularity and order, cleanliness, neatness, decency, truth and honesty: these were to be the principles inculcated in the pupils of a National School teacher.<sup>17</sup> While these qualities cannot be faulted in themselves, the rigid separation of dogmatic religious and literary instruction was a problem for the Presentation sisters within the National School system.

Despite such problems, the school at Sexton Street, Limerick, continued to expand. By 1870 there were some 550 pupils being taught by 21 nuns and 14 paid monitresses.<sup>18</sup> Thousands of young girls had passed through the schools from 1837 onwards. All of these would have been given a basic rudimentary literacy education, helping to reduce the overall illiteracy figures in the city from the 42.1% commented on in 1841 to 33.2% as reported in the Census of 1861. How was this education viewed by contemporaries? Those who examined the schools from within the National School system were divided in their opinions.

Head Inspector Sheridan, for instance, whose district encompassed Limerick city, firmly believed that there was a problem with the standard of education imparted, due to 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".<sup>19</sup> This was due to the fact that the sisters were not required to submit to an examination and then classification as ordinary teachers were; rather, salary was paid as a capitation allowance to the school,

<sup>14</sup> J. Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure*, Dublin 1981, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Reports of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland from the Year 1846 to 1848, inclusive*, ii, 163.

<sup>16</sup> D. H. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment*, London 1970, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> "Twelve Practical Rules for the Teachers of National Schools" in *Reports of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland from the Year 1846 to 1848, inclusive*, ii, 189.

<sup>18</sup> *Powis Commission, 1870*, vol. VII, 425.

<sup>19</sup> 'Head Inspector Sheridan's General Report, for the Year 1860', in *H.C. 1864 (179) XLVI*, p. 11.



the amount paid depending on the average daily attendance. If the nuns had agreed to an examination and classification, they would have received much more money. However, they considered it more important to retain some measure of independence within the state's educational bureaucracy.

Sheridan's report was not totally damning however. Writing generally of the convent schools in his district, he says:

...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...<sup>20</sup>

District Inspector Andrew O'Callaghan's report of 1864 dealt specifically with the Presentation School at Sexton Street, and the problems dealt with in the previous report came into sharper focus. O'Callaghan castigates the standard of teaching of the nuns. He said their method of teaching was defective and their organising skill was very imperfect.<sup>21</sup> Judging by results obtained, the efficiency of instruction was very unsatisfactory, except, interestingly enough, in reading and writing. At least the basics were being dealt with adequately. He himself summed up the situation thus:

Notwithstanding that the teachers of this school are undoubtedly influenced by high and holy motives to extend the blessings of... education... their efforts have fallen very far short of the results to be desired, as far as secular education is concerned.<sup>22</sup>

He made a further charge in his report which is of greater interest when we remember that the particular aim of the Presentation Order was the education of poor female children. He said that the nuns "have not succeeded in any marked manner in rescuing from total ignorance the children belonging to the more destitute classes".<sup>23</sup> This is a very damning assessment of a congregation who came to Limerick to work with the poor and destitute and attempted to alleviate their sufferings through education. It is worth noting what he said:

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.<sup>24</sup>

This situation is probably partially explained by the fact that the Presentation nuns were bound by the rule of enclosure, that is, they could not leave the convent grounds. There can be no doubt that an inability to minister to the poor in their homes and areas hampered the sisters' work, in that they were forced to wait for the poor to come to them. But come they did, as is evident even from O'Callaghan's passing comment on the children fed daily. It is obvious also from his remarks that the schools catered for those at the bottom end of the social spectrum: not only the destitute and poor but also the lower middle classes.

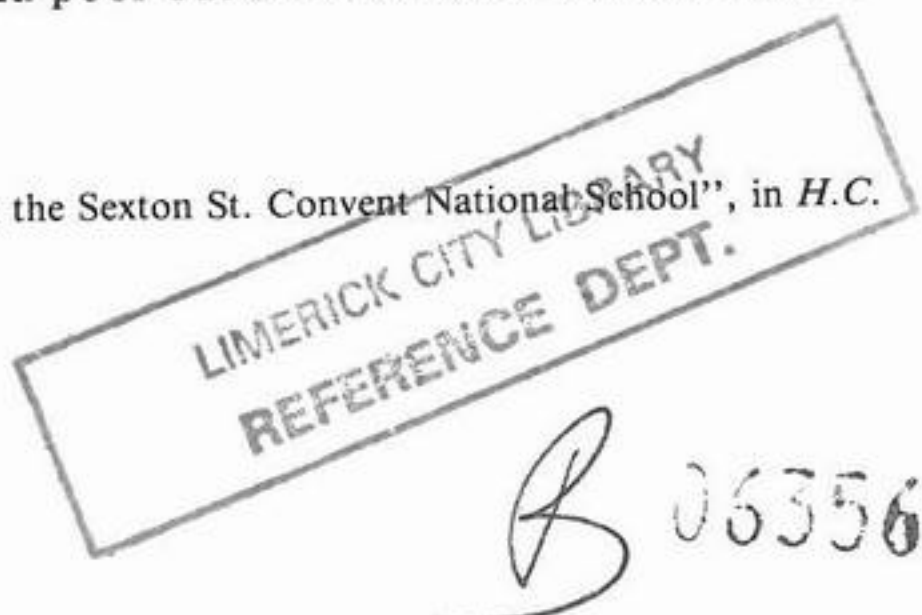
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> District Inspector Andrew O'Callaghan's "Report on the Sexton St. Convent National School", in *H.C. 1864 (405) XLVI*, p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.



The Powis Commission of 1870 again notes many of the problems we have outlined. Writing generally of convent schools, it says:

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.<sup>25</sup>

In dealing with the Presentation nuns in particular, one of the commissioners says that:

The teaching seems to me very good on the whole. In all the schools [the sisters] did a great deal of 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 was that it would be hard to exaggerate its benefits to the children in later life.<sup>26</sup>

Again and again one meets this approval of the moral training imparted by the sisters. Commissioner Laurie in his report on the schools of Limerick city in 1870 asserts that "the Roman Catholic communities have alone redeemed the city . . . from the reproach of being a hotbed of vice and ignorance".<sup>27</sup> He further declared that the schools were "free from the blemishes of the ordinary National school".<sup>28</sup> He even found the aggregate results of instruction very much to his satisfaction.

Thus it may be seen that contemporaries (even those within the National School system) were very aware of the benefits accruing from the education provided by the Sisters. As an editorial in the *Limerick Reporter* commented at the beginning of the sisters' work in Limerick:

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 one day destined to be the wives and mothers of people.<sup>29</sup>

The Presentation sisters themselves were probably unaware of the broader implications of their work. We, with hindsight, may focus on the way they helped secure the Catholic Church's position in the nineteenth century, or on the way they aided the civilizing process inherent in education. They, however, were merely doing, in their own limited fashion, what they could to help the poor of Limerick while remaining faithful to their vocation and the aim of the Presentation congregation: to educate poor female children. As the *Presentation Constitutions* puts it: "by impressing on [the young] a horror for vice, and the love of virtue, and by instructing them in the duties of religion", they helped in the attempt to make the poor, in the words of the *Limerick Reporter*: "worthy members of the great family of mankind".

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<sup>25</sup> *Powis Commission*, i, part 1, 383.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in R. Considine, *Listening Journey*, Victoria, Australia, 1983, p. 295.

<sup>27</sup> *Powis Commission*, ii, 293.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>29</sup> *Limerick Reporter*, 4 December 1840.