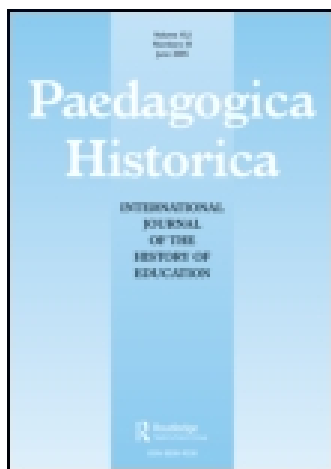


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“To the very antipodes”: nineteenth-century Dominican Sister-teachers in Ireland and New Zealand

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This paper examines the educational and religious lives of Dominican Sisters in nineteenth-century Ireland and New Zealand. It considers developments in Irish society and culture that shaped the educational mission of Dominican Sisters, as well as some of the challenges facing 10 Sisters who, in 1871, journeyed from Dublin to establish a foundation in Dunedin, New Zealand. Drawing on previously unpublished archival sources, including Sisters’ letters “home” to Ireland, this paper explores ways in which the expectations of the Founder Sisters were initially shaped by “Old World” social and cultural structures and their dependence on their motherhouse in Sion Hill, Dublin. It examines changes in the lives of Sisters as their links with Ireland diminished and they began to reshape their educational mission around a new cultural and religious identity. This paper challenges educational historians to acknowledge the role Catholic sister-teachers played in the formation of national education systems.

Keywords: nineteenth-century Sister teachers; Ireland and New Zealand; religious and cultural identity; new archival sources; national education systems

Researching the lives of Catholic Sisters

In the past 20 years, particularly in the Western world, there has been an increased scholarly interest in the history of Catholic Sisters and an expanding body of literature that has considered ways in which nuns were and are “central” not only to Catholic history, but also to women’s history, the history of education and the social history of nations. During this time, researchers have begun to examine the intersection of the history of Roman Catholic Sisters with the fields of social, educational and intellectual history and the significance of issues such as gender, race, ethnicity and class.¹

Early work on Catholic Sisters, principally in the United States and Ireland, highlighted the focus of Church histories on the actions and decisions of the hierarchy and clergy and the general neglect of Catholic Sisters. Mary J. Oates, in her history of the work of Catholic Sisters in Massachusetts, noted the way official Catholic publications recorded the “activities and accomplishments of churchmen”

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¹Elizabeth Smyth, “Writing the History of Women Religious in Canada (1996–2001),” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 23 (Spring 2001): 205–10.

while neglecting full-time female church workers.² As Caitriona Clear put it in her history of nineteenth-century Irish Sisters:

Nuns are usually viewed historically as an effective auxiliary arm to the modernising Catholic Church and are either praised uncritically, relegated to footnotes or ignored altogether in diocesan histories and other works of a general nature. Nuns have suffered the fate of historical marginalisation common to most women and to many male workers.³

However, as historians expanded their focus beyond the public sphere of finance and government to explore the private world of family and reproduction, they began to study “not only the self-conscious and articulate minority but the life experiences of the majority of women and men who never attained prominence and rarely left records for future generations”.⁴ In this way, scholars of women’s history and historians of religion began to ask different questions of the past and look for wider sources and new methodologies. Margaret Thompson, a historian of American Catholic Sisters, distinguished the new approach from traditional historiography by the following characteristics: “its critique of patriarchy, its analysis of the connection between ordination and power, its recognition of the pervasiveness and importance of un-ordained ministry and the roles of the laity, and... its identification of trans-denominational patterns”.⁵ At the same time that Catholic Sisters adopted a more open attitude to historical research, an expanding feminist scholarship began to ask questions about women’s paid and unpaid work and private as well as public lives. As Marta Danylewycz noted in relation to the Canadian context, “at last it has become possible to study the thousands of veiled women who left such an indelible mark on [Quebec’s] history”.⁶

This research, then, is a product of changing perspectives on the significance of Catholic Sisters in historical scholarship. It makes Catholic Sisters the centre of the inquiry by studying their individual and collective histories, relating them to the broader issues of culture, women’s work and their place in education and in wider society. In addition, this paper has a more specific objective: it focuses on a specific congregation of nuns, the Dominican Sisters – 10 of whom travelled from Dublin to Dunedin in 1871 – and explains their development as professed Sisters and professional educators through the perspective of their experiences as women inside and beyond convent walls.

This research reflects my own personal and intellectual concerns. As Shulamit Reinharz has pointed out, feminist researchers frequently begin with an issue that

²Mary J. Oates, “Organised Voluntarism: The Catholic Sisters in Massachusetts, 1870–1940,” in *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 141.

³Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1987), xvii.

⁴Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840–1920*, The Canada Social History Series (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 14.

⁵Oates, “Organised Voluntarism,” 141–69; Elizabeth Kolmer, ASC, “Catholic Women Religious and Women’s History: A Survey of the Literature,” in *Women in American Religion*, ed. J. James Wilson (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 127–69; Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*; Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland*.

⁶Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*, 16.

concerns them personally, something that is both “an intellectual question and a personal trouble”.⁷ I grew up at a time when Sisters wearing traditional religious habits were a common sight in Catholic schools, teaching large primary and secondary classes and leading and managing parochial schools and secondary colleges – at a time when few women were principals in contemporary state schools.⁸ As a pupil in 1960s Catholic primary and secondary schools, I saw Sister-Teachers in action every school day and, like many of my cohort, assumed that would continue to be the case. With hindsight, this was a world on the cusp of the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), and the Sisters’ lives as professed women and professional educators were about to change forever. In earlier research, I have explored the “hidden lives” of New Zealand Dominican Sisters in the years before the Second Vatican Council, studying a time period when the order was well established in two dioceses and the numbers of Sisters were still expanding. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when this earlier study was undertaken, there were still significant numbers of Sisters available for interview, even though the majority had retired from active teaching roles. Now, when numbers of Sisters continue to steadily decline and the majority of Sisters are in their late 60s and older, my focus has turned to the source of the Dominican foundation in New Zealand, to an exploration of the ways in which nineteenth-century developments in Ireland influenced the “educational mission” of Dominican Sisters and the way the New Zealand foundation was shaped by its on-going links with its Irish roots.

Building on extensive research that has emerged from Ireland, the United States, Canada, Europe and Britain, as well as from Australia and New Zealand, this paper sets out to examine the role a particular group of Catholic Sisters played in critical developments in education in nineteenth-century Ireland and New Zealand.⁹ In keeping with the theme of this special edition, this paper is concerned with writing the missing lives of an important group of women educators into historical accounts, to broaden existing perspectives that focus on developments in state education and to include a consideration of the role Catholic Sisters played as educators in the establishment of a national education system in New Zealand.

⁷Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 260.

⁸Jenny Collins, “Creating Spaces in a Male Domain: Sister Principals in Catholic Schools, 1850–1974,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* (forthcoming, 2013).

⁹See for example Margaret MacCurtain, “Late in the Field: Catholic Sisters in Twentieth-century Ireland and the New Religious History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 6, no. 4 (1995): 49–63; Elizabeth Smyth, “Professionalization among the Professed: The Case of Roman Catholic Religious,” in *Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women’s Professional Work*, ed. Elizabeth Smyth et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 234–54; John Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003); Bart Hellinckx, Frank Simon, and Marc Depaepe, *The Forgotten Contribution of the Teaching Sisters: A Historiographical Essay on the Educational Work of Catholic Women Religious in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009); Carmen Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (Manchester University Press: Boomerang Books, 2008); Stephanie Burley, “Engagement with Empires: Irish Catholic Female Religious Teachers in Colonial South Australia, 1868–1901,” *Irish Educational Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 2012): 175–90; Collins, “Creating Spaces in a Male Domain.”

In search of nineteenth-century Irish Dominican Sisters

Communities of Catholic Sisters, both active and contemplative, have been a feature of the Catholic church since the second century. In the centuries that followed, the papacy worked to control and regulate the lives of all religious orders, male and female. Rules governing religious life for women were stricter than for their male counterparts, with an insistence on enclosure common. Strict rules of living were set down for all houses of Catholic Sisters, but the enforcement of those rules was usually left to the diocesan authorities. Thus, the survival of particular congregations frequently depended on a successful working relationship with local ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁰ This was the case for the Dominican Sisters who first established convents in Ireland in the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹

Like other Catholic religious orders in Ireland, Dominicans were suppressed from time to time under the penal laws imposed by the English political system, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century many of the restrictions imposed on them had been lifted.¹² The expansion of convents that occurred over the course of the nineteenth century in Ireland occurred partly as a result of the lifting of these restrictions, and partly as a consequence of the expansion of the middle classes and the re-emergence of Catholics into public life. This can be seen in the increased numbers of women entering convents, which rose from 122 nuns in 1800 to 1552 in 1850 and to 8031 in 1901.¹³ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, 11 convents existed in Ireland; at the end, there were 368, and as Caitriona Clear notes, most were located “south of an imaginary line from Dublin to Galway”.¹⁴ As this paper will detail, this expansion was the source of generations of missionaries who travelled to distant places such as the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the huge increase in the numbers of nuns at the national level was not evenly distributed among all the convents in Ireland, as is evident when comparing the number of entrants in the years 1861 to 1900 in the Dominican convent in Galway with the Mercy convent in Limerick. During this time period, the Galway Dominicans averaged only 1.5 recruits per year, while the Mercy recruits steadily increased from 3.1 per year in 1861–1870 to more than five per year in the period 1891–1900. The difference can be partly attributed to the fact that the new Mercy congregation was diocesan-based and drew their recruits from the national and “superior” schools, which they ran side by side. Meanwhile the Dominicans, a pontifical order with lines of authority outside the diocesan system, drew their recruits largely from their local “select” schools.¹⁶ While both orders required women entering their ranks to bring a dowry, the average dowry

¹⁰Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*.

¹¹The first record of the foundation of a Dominican convent was in Galway in 1644.

¹²Maura Duggan, OP, *In Search of Truth: Journeys of Nineteenth-Century Irish Dominican Women* (Dublin: Linden Publishing Services, 2010).

¹³Anthony Fahey, *Female Asceticism in the Catholic Church: A Case Study of Nuns in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1982).

¹⁴Caitriona Clear, “The Limits of Female Autonomy: Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland,” in *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1990), 21.

¹⁵Suellen Hoy, “The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women to the United States, 1812-1914,” *Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 4 (1995): 64–98.

¹⁶Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*.

required for women entering a Mercy congregation was much smaller – thus enabling women from a wider range of economic circumstances to enter.¹⁷ On the other hand, a substantial dowry was a condition for entry to a Dominican congregation, limiting recruits to women from higher social and economic circumstances.¹⁸

Problems with ecclesiastical authorities also restricted the expansion of Dominican convents such as the Cabra convent, first established in 1719 in Channel Row, Dublin.¹⁹ The Dominican Sisters, as a pontifical order, came under the jurisdiction of the Irish Dominican Provincial during a period when the Dominican Order of Friars was in decline in Ireland.²⁰ By 1830, the recently established convent in Cabra, already reduced to a community of three, discovered that they were not included in the Archbishop's "list of schools" in Dublin. Facing the threat of imminent closure, they saw a potential solution in adopting the model of ecclesiastical jurisdiction utilised by the "modern" diocesan-based teaching orders, such as the Mercy Sisters, who were thriving and expanding. Mother Columba Maher, then Sub-Prioress, employed the offices of her cousin Dr. Paul Cullen, Rector of the Irish College in Rome, and Roman authorities approved a change of jurisdiction in 1831.²¹ Dominican schools in Dublin, now under the direct patronage of Daniel Murray, the Archbishop of Dublin, began to thrive and community numbers increased substantially; this is evident in the 22 new professions by 1842.²² However, in 1836, following a period of unrest in the Cabra community, six Sisters "dissatisfied with the new order of things" left to establish a new foundation.²³ Led by Mother Magdalen Butler,²⁴ who clearly regretted her earlier support for the change, the initial move from Cabra to Mount St. Dublin appears to have been undertaken with great secrecy: "the first intimation Mother Columba [now prioress of Cabra] got... was to see the carriages one morning drive up the lawn for the nuns".²⁵

¹⁷Mercy Congregation, *Maxims*, 9. The average dowry brought by women professed as choir nuns in the Galway Mercy convent in the years 1840–1857 was £375, although Catherine McAuley, the founder, was said to never refuse a candidate "because she had not got a bag of money."

¹⁸Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. The father of Kathleen Doherty, for example, who entered the Dominican convent in Galway direct from its boarding school in 1908, paid £500 directly to the convent as well as other unspecified amounts.

¹⁹The Channel Row convent moved in 1808 to Clontarf and then to Cabra in 1819, before establishing a new foundation at Sion Hill, Dublin, in 1836.

²⁰Duggan, OP, *In Search of Truth*. Much has been written about the problems associated with the jurisdiction issues. They presented some difficulties for the Dominican Sisters in New Zealand when they were seeking their independent constitutions in 1933.

²¹*Cabra Annals*, 87. At least, that is how the annalist presented the matter.

²²Duggan, OP, *In Search of Truth*.

²³M.M. Butler, Cabra Archives.

²⁴M.M. Magdalen Butler had been prioress at the time the application for change of jurisdiction was made.

²⁵OPG (Order of Preachers, Galway). Letter of Mother Ignatius O'Doherty to Mother Bertrand Maher, December 15 1902. The other members who formed this new community were: Sisters Peter Colgan, Teresa Gan, Joseph Vercome, and Agnes Rooney (who, at 60 years of age and having spent 30 years at Sion Hill, volunteered for the New Zealand mission; she died in Dunedin (aged 91) on October 10 1902).

In search of a Dominican education: Sion Hill developments

The new community established a day school at Mount Street, admitted a number of postulants and, in 1840, moved to the parish of Booterstown on the southeast coast of Dublin, where they bought a large property named Sion Hill, which was part of the Pembroke estate. The Sisters then opened a boarding and day school, but soon found the £50 fees they charged to be beyond the means of the families in the district and the school gradually declined. In January 1936, after debates among the Sisters – and resistance on the part of the foundresses, who wished to carry on traditions established at Cabra and limit access to the boarding school to the children of the upper classes – a decision was made by a new prioress, Mother Gertrude Kelly, to reduce the annual fee to £30 per pupil.

This educational move was to have significant consequences for Sion Hill (and for the later foundations in New Zealand and South Africa) as the Sisters moved to adapt their educational practice to the changing demographics of nineteenth-century Irish society. In this case, the lowering of fees enabled a rapidly expanding clientele – middle-class parents who had moved to the area of Booterstown, Blackrock and Kingstown as a result of a new railway from Dublin to Kingstown – to take advantage of “select education” for their daughters offered by the Dominican Sisters.²⁶ As the *Annals* note, “the good result of these measures was soon apparent by the influx of pupils, while the school still retained its character for being select”.²⁷

Given the history and background of Dominican Sisters in Ireland, it is not surprising that the education provided in Dominican schools, even in the later foundations of Cabra, tended to concentrate on what was acceptable to the upper and middle classes of the day.²⁸ Cabra’s nineteenth-century daughter houses in Sion Hill, Kingston and Belfast, while being autonomous convents, continued the traditions they had inherited through the Channel Row convent. As Maire Kealy puts it, these older eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century schools of the order catered for the daughters of landed gentry and the wealthy merchant classes; in many cases, the Sisters were educating their own nieces and the daughters of family friends.²⁹ As the first prospectus of the boarding school at Cabra indicates, girls were to be made aware of their position in life and that should they “rise in society”, their Dominican education would allow them to take their place “with propriety, ease and dignity”.³⁰

The Dominican Sisters taught what were called “the usual branches of English education”, which included grammar, history, geography, the use of the globes, writing and arithmetic, as well as French, Italian and, in some schools, German. Most schools had on the prospectus “every species of Plain and Ornamental

²⁶Maire M. Kealy, OP, *Dominican Education in Ireland 1820–1930* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007). After the passing of the Intermediate Education Act in 1878, the Sion Hill community was the first Dominican convent to take up the cause of a broader curriculum for girls by requesting permission from the Archbishop of Dublin to participate in the state examinations.

²⁷OPSH, *Sion Hill Annals 1845*, 12.

²⁸Kealy, OP, *Dominican Education in Ireland*.

²⁹*Thom’s Official directory of the U.K. and Ireland, 1850–1902* (Dublin: Alex Thom, published annually). The Directory indicates that family background of pupils at Sion Hill belonged to the professional, farming or merchant class.

³⁰Kealy, OP, *Dominican Education in Ireland 1820–1930*, 30.

needlework and the accomplishment necessary to complete the education of a Young Lady".³¹ The Dominican approach to education in nineteenth-century Ireland and their foundations in South Africa and New Zealand was firmly modeled on Victorian understandings of womanhood, with the ideal woman leading a sheltered life, not competing with men intellectually but acting as guardian of the home, which was seen as her domain. In the case of Irish Catholic women, a strong commitment to their religion was expected. All educational developments by the Dominican Sisters in Cabra and Sion Hill were subject to prior episcopal approval by the archbishops of Dublin, Daniel Murray and Paul Cullen, whose combined terms of office spanned the years 1823–1878 – the half-century preceding the passing of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act in 1878. Although the new Act was designed to provide secondary education for boys and girls, equal status for girls was not part of the bishops' agenda. Neither envisaged a secondary education system that would prepare young women for higher education or for paid employment.³² For example, a suggestion by the Sion Hill Sisters that their pupils be permitted to participate in state examinations in 1878 met with episcopal disapproval, although the Sisters eventually managed to find a way to circumvent the bishops' objections.³³

Dominican education at Dominican schools such as Sion Hill was influenced by the style and content of education offered on the continent, particularly that offered by the French religious orders who came to Ireland in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Some French boarding school customs current in Sion Hill and Cabra – including monthly "reports" presided over by the prioress, the wearing of white gloves, the practice of curtsies and the ranking of students according to marks awarded in monthly tests – can be attributed to the education of some Dominican Sisters in France before they entered the Irish Dominican convents.³⁴ According to oral accounts, a number of these customs persisted in Dominican boarding convents in New Zealand schools as late as the 1940s.³⁵

New foundations in the antipodes

Over the course of the nineteenth century, thousands of Irish Sisters emigrated to European colonies in countries such as the United States, Canada and South Africa. They came at the invitation of Irish bishops and priests desperate to provide schools, hospitals and social services to the large numbers of Irish emigrants flocking to the far corners of the globe in search of new lives and opportunities. The substantial numbers of women entering religious life fuelled these developments. As Carmen Mangion puts it, the expansion of Catholic Sisters into the fields of education, health care and social services became a launching pad for missionary activities both

³¹Kealy, OP, *Dominican Education in Ireland*, 78.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid. The Eccles St. school "for orphan girls of upper classes" which opened in 1882 offered the state examinations, on the basis that as it catered for daughters of respectable families who had fallen on hard times, the state qualification would enable them get suitable work and support themselves after leaving school.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Interview with Sister M. Winefride, OP, 1998.

domestic and international. As missionaries, Catholic Sisters were major builders of the Catholic church and key players in the establishment of educational and social services and the consolidation of Catholic identity in countries such as Ireland, England, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.³⁶

Suellen Hoy, in her study of the recruitment and emigration of Irish Catholic Sisters to the United States in the years 1812–1914, identifies two waves of emigration for Catholic Sisters from Ireland to the “New World”. The first lasted from 1812 to 1881 and was led by older religious women with important family connections who frequently came from the most respectable and wealthy Catholic families in Ireland. They were also well educated; some had studied abroad, as had been the custom during penal times when Catholic education was banned in Ireland.³⁷

In contrast to the Mercy Sisters, who were engaged in a wider apostolate of teaching, health care and social services, the Dominican Sisters belonged to an old order with lives largely focused on prayer and the education of middle and upper-class girls. Nevertheless, the pattern of expansion and emigration in religious congregations during this period was as true for Dominican convents in Dublin as it was for the “modern” congregations such as the Mercy Sisters. From the 1860s onward, the Dominican convents received a number of invitations from bishops wanting to provide “select schools” in their dioceses.³⁸ In 1867, Sion Hill convent received invitations from Australia, the United States and South Africa; the Chapter decided eventually to send Sisters to accompany Bishop Patrick Moran to establish a foundation in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.³⁹

Three years later, Moran, now appointed as Bishop of Dunedin, Otago, New Zealand, returned to Sion Hill in search of Dominican recruits for the recently established diocese. He convinced the Sisters that the newly colonised New Zealand needed semi-enclosed educationalists such as themselves.⁴⁰ According to Maura Duggan, this was seen as a much more challenging mission for the Dominican Sisters.⁴¹ Very little was known of “the very antipodes” – as the bishop himself had

³⁶Mangion, *Contested Identities*; Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*; Smyth, “Professionalization among the Professed”; Jenny Collins, “Schooling for Faith, Citizenship and Social Mobility: Catholic Secondary Education in New Zealand, 1924–1944,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 37, no. 2 (2005): 157–72; MacCurtain, “Late in the Field”; Burley, “Engagement with Empires.”

³⁷Hoy, “The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women.”

³⁸Cabra established foundations in Lisbon (1860), New Orleans (1860) and South Africa (1863), as well as two foundations in Australia – in Adelaide (1868) and Maitland (1867). By then, relations with Sion Hill appear to have improved.

³⁹Duggan, OP, *In Search of Truth*. Dr. James Quin applied for Sisters to go to Brisbane, the Most Rev. Dr. Allemany, OP, applied for nuns for his diocese in San Francisco and Dr. Patrick Moran, newly appointed bishop of Port Elizabeth, applied for Sisters for his mission to Port Elizabeth in South Africa. It is likely that the decision to go to South Africa was encouraged by the Cabra congregation’s successful foundation in Cape Town in 1863. The Sisters probably knew Moran from his time as parish priest at Booterstown.

⁴⁰Born in County Wicklow in 1823 as the son of a tenant farmer, Moran had witnessed the horrors of the cholera epidemic that followed the great famine. Educated in Dublin and Wexford, he was trained for the priesthood at St. Patrick’s College in Maynooth and ordained in 1847. After serving in Dublin parishes, he was consecrated as bishop, taking charge of the Eastern Province of the Cape Colony in South Africa in 1856, where he remained for 13 years before being appointed as Bishop of Dunedin.

⁴¹Duggan, OP, *In Search of Truth*.

not seen his diocese, and “could get but uncertain information about it in Europe.”⁴² The new mission was very different from the well-established select school at Sion Hill, and doubts were expressed about its suitability for an enclosed order of nuns.

After the discovery of gold in Otago in 1861, Dunedin, almost overnight, had grown “from a struggling village to a sizeable city of 20,000.”⁴³ The Catholic church was under pressure to provide an education system for this, the most populous diocese in the country, where the existing education system was seen as largely Presbyterian in culture. Moran, fresh from his experience in South Africa, was determined to establish a Dominican foundation rather than a more active congregation such as the Sisters of Mercy.⁴⁴ However, that it was seen as a serious decision for the Sisters can be seen from the procedures for the selection of volunteers. On the 16th of August, a formal letter from the Vicar General confirmed the formal consent of Cardinal Paul Cullen,⁴⁵ emphasised the voluntary nature of the mission and outlined the procedure to be followed:

The Community is to be informed that while on the one hand, no Sister can be sent on the Foundation except of her own perfectly free will and determination, on the other, to maintain the vested right which the Community has to the services of each Sister who has been admitted as a Member of it, each Sister shall have an opportunity of signifying by a secret vote her objection to an particular Member of the Community being allowed to leave it.⁴⁶

Volunteers were asked to sign an agreement that they were satisfied with arrangements and would make “no further claim on the Community and its property”.⁴⁷ On 1 October, the eve of Rosary Sunday, 10 Sisters were chosen for the New Zealand mission:

Sister Mary Agnes Rooney (59, professed 34 years, a Cabra novice, who had moved to Sion Hill after her profession in 1836);

Sister Mary Francis Sullivan, (45, professed 19 years);

⁴²*Sion Hill Annals*.

⁴³E.R. Simmons, *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in New Zealand* (Auckland: Catholic Publications Centre, 1978).

⁴⁴When asked why he preferred the semi-enclosed Dominicans rather than the Sisters of Mercy (who might be seen as more suitable to work in a newly colonised country like New Zealand), Moran had replied – with typical succinctness – “it would be better for the people to come to the Sisters rather than the Sisters come to the people.” Related by Mother. M. Michael McCarthy, OP, to Mary Augustine McCarthy, OP, *Star in the South* (Dunedin: St. Dominic’s Priory, 1970), 16. The Sisters of Mercy were sometimes known (somewhat disparagingly) as the “walking nuns.”

⁴⁵Paul Cullen, Rector of the Irish College in Rome from 1832 to 1850, was appointed as the first Irish Cardinal in 1849.

⁴⁶L. Forde, Vic-Gen to Rev. Mother Clare Eliot (elected Prioress of Sion Hill in 1864 and on a number of occasions until early the 1900s). McCarthy, *Star in the South*, 17. According to Duggan, this procedure is likely to have been aimed at protecting the home convent from excessive depletion of its members, rather than the result of a negative attitude toward any particular sister who might offer herself for the mission. Duggan, OP, *In Search of Truth*.

⁴⁷L. Forde, Vic-Gen to Rev. Mother Clare Eliot. *Ibid*. This agreement was to prove problematic for sisters wishing to return to their home communities due to illness or unsuitability.

- Sister Mary Vincent Whitty (37, professed 18 years);
- Sister Mary Gabriel Gill (33, professed 16 years);
- Sister Mary Catherine Hughes (40, professed 13 years);
- Sister Mary De Ricci Kirby (33, professed 11 years);
- Sister Mary Gertrude Dooley (33, professed 11 years);
- Sister Mary Bertrand McLaughlin (19, professed one year);
- Sister Mary Lucy Tracy (Lay Sister, professed 12 years);
- Sister Mary Peter Jordan, (Lay Sister, 21, not yet professed).⁴⁸

The Prioress of the new foundation was to be Mother M. Gabriel and the Sub-Prioress Mother M. Agnes, although these appointments, for some reason, were not announced until the Sisters had begun their voyage.

The pattern of recruitment here fits Hoy's description of the first wave of emigration of women religious. Apart from the two Lay Sisters, the majority of the founders were mature women, well educated and professed for a number of years. They came from some of the most respectable and wealthy Catholic families in Dublin and at least three of them had important family connections.⁴⁹ Sister de Ricci Kirby, for example, was the niece of Archbishop Kirby, Rector of Irish College, Rome. He was a generous benefactor of the Sion Hill convent and later of St. Dominic's Dunedin and proved a very useful contact for the Sisters, providing them with up-to-date information on Church matters.⁵⁰ Sister Catherine Hughes – sister-in-law to Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Irish nationalist and Australian colonial politician – had entered Sion Hill at a mature age. Her mother and Sisters had “kept a first class school at Whitehall, Blackrock”.⁵¹ She came from a very musical family; one Sister was a celebrated musician, while she herself was known as a fine musician and teacher.

Mother Gabriel Gill (Victoria), born in 1837, was the only surviving child of a wealthy Dublin brewer, Andrew Gill, and his wife Ellen.⁵² Victoria was educated privately at first with private governesses and tutors before attending Loreto Abbey in Rathfarnham. At 13, she was sent as a boarder to Sion Hill. Aged 17, she accompanied her parents on a tour of Europe and made her “entrance into Society”. Intended for a great marriage, Victoria had other plans, announcing her intention to enter the convent at Sion Hill.⁵³ Aware of her parents' opposition, Victoria left a

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Hoy, “The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women”; McCarthy, *Star in the South*.

⁵⁰Mary Augustine McCarthy, OP, *Mother of the Missions, Mother Mary Gabriel Gill, OSD* (Dunedin: St. Dominic's Priory, 1989).

⁵¹McCarthy, *Star in the South*, 20.

⁵²There had been 13 children in all, including one son.

⁵³McCarthy, *Mother of the Missions*.

ball, went to Sion Hill (still dressed in her ballgown) and requested to be admitted to the novitiate:

On her entrance to Society her hand was almost immediately sought in marriage, to the satisfaction of her parents, who had formed hopes of a brilliant settlement for their beautiful daughter. Great was their consternation when they discovered that in the cold grey of a winter's morning, the child, in whom they had centred all their worldly hopes, had fled from her happy home to enter the Dominican Novitiate at Sion Hill, then in the early stages of its foundation and offering all the trials the most fervent lover of religious poverty could desire.⁵⁴

Her disappointed parents seem to have bowed to the inevitable and on 17 August 1853, she received the Dominican habit and the religious name of Sister Mary Gabriel of the Most Blessed Sacrament, making her religious profession on 18 May 1854 to the Prioress, Mother Mary O'Brien-Butler. Proficient in French and German, she taught at Sion Hill before becoming Mistress of Schools, a post she held until she was appointed Mistress of Novices in 1867.⁵⁵

From Dublin to Dunedin: "storms, a near shipwreck and a mutiny"

The Sisters set sail from Kingstown⁵⁶ for Gravesend on 5 October 1870, along with two professed Dominican Sisters and a postulant from Kingstown who were bound for the diocese of Maitland, New South Wales. On 9 October, they boarded a sailing ship, the *Glendower*, a steamship being considered too expensive.⁵⁷ By then, the party consisted of nine priests and 15 Sisters, including Sisters for Hobart, priests for the Australian diocese of Bathurst and Maitland and a theological student for Auckland. The three-month journey was marked by storms, a near shipwreck and a mutiny by drunken sailors.⁵⁸ Because of the laundry difficulties, the Sisters wore the black habits of Lay Sisters instead of their usual cream habits. At a stop-over in Melbourne, an enthusiastic reception awaited them, as well as an offer they must have been tempted to accept. The annalist recorded:

The consideration was placed before them that the high-class education they were to give in their schools would not just then be what was required in so new a country as New Zealand. As an inducement to stay in Melbourne, they were offered their choice of the best sites, but, how could they forsake "their little bishop."⁵⁹

Continuing their journey across the Tasman Sea, they disembarked at Port Chalmers on Saturday 18 February to a tumultuous welcome from the mostly Irish Catholics in the city:

⁵⁴S.M. Alphonsus Owens (who came to New Zealand from Sion Hill in 1874) to Sion Hill, 1905.

⁵⁵McCarthy, *Mother of the Missions*.

⁵⁶Dun Laoghaire.

⁵⁷As it was, the voyage cost £900 sterling.

⁵⁸McCarthy, *Star in the South*.

⁵⁹*Annals of St. Dominic's*, January 1 1870, Dominican Sisters of Aotearoa New Zealand Archives (hereafter, DSANZ).

A large number of the residents turned out on the occasion and several Catholics had interviews with the Sisters and the rev. gentlemen before a start was made. In the first and second carriages, which were close were four Sisters in each, followed by an open barouche, with two Sisters and two ladies from Dunedin... in this order they drove up from the Port towards town, where they were met by a number of citizens who followed the procession to the Catholic Church.⁶⁰

The scene was immediately set for a clash between the French Marist priest, Delphin Moreau – who had worked since 1861 to bring the sacraments to an increasingly rebellious and unappreciative flock – and Moran, the new Bishop of Dunedin.⁶¹ According to an old lady who recalled the scene many years later, Father Moreau (whose grasp of colloquial English was never entirely secure) welcomed Moran with a warning about the limited finances of the small Catholic community of Dunedin: “Designating first the Bishop seated in the sanctuary, and then the daughters of St. Dominic, seated in a row below him, he said wistfully: I am tight, you are tight, we are all tight together!”⁶²

Although the Sisters’ response to this welcome is not recorded, Moran was horrified at the rawness of his diocese. Rather unfairly, he blamed the Marists for the circumstances he found himself in, without acknowledging the missionary nature of their situation, their limited resources and the rapid and unforeseen population growth that occurred in the area as the result of the gold rushes in the years before his accession.⁶³ In a response that was typical of the man, he came out fighting, his first pastoral letter sending waves of consternation amongst his flock:

We have learned how deplorable is the state of religion here... the information given to us in Europe... was most incorrect... We were led to believe there was a good Church in Dunedin, eleven other Churches... – a fair Episcopal residence – Schools – a large house for a convent of Religious Ladies – all free from debt... On the faith of the information thus given, we brought with us ten Nuns to inaugurate the most important and essential work of Catholic education.⁶⁴

The Sisters, despite the absence of a promised convent and some pretty basic facilities, set to work. On Monday 20 February they took over a small primary school previously run by a Mrs. Conway, and opened a high school for day pupils four days later.⁶⁵ Sister Francis Sullivan wrote to the Prioress of Sion Hill about some of the difficulties:

There is absolutely no money in hand. The (school) is wretched, not larger or in any way better, or to my mind even as good as our Day School in Sion, and as to the preparations for the nuns, now that we know the truth, they would make you laugh. Mind that is what you are to do.⁶⁶

⁶⁰*Otago Daily Times*, February 20 1871. Due to enclosure requirements, the Choir Sisters probably travelled in the closed carriages with the two Lay Sisters in the open barouche.

⁶¹Hugh M. Laracy, “Bishop Moran, Irish Politics and Catholicism in New Zealand,” *Journal of Religious History* 6, no. 1 (1970): 62–76.

⁶²The welcome took place in St. Joseph’s Church. McCarthy, *Star in the South*, 35.

⁶³Michael King. *Gods farthest outpost: A history of Catholics in New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 1997).

⁶⁴McCarthy, *Star in the South*, 38–9.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶S.M. Francis to Prioress, Sion Hill, March 17 1871, DSANZ.

As educated upper-class Irish women, the Sisters probably had more in common with the Protestant girls who were increasingly admitted to the “select” school than they did with the working-class Irish families who filled the “free school” at St. Joseph’s. Few Irish settlers were from Dublin, like the Sisters. Most, like my own forebears, were sons and daughters of small tenant farmers who had left the impoverished south and west of Ireland on assisted passages. Their rowdy habits and egalitarian attitudes were at odds with the refined upper-class upbringing and enclosed convent life of the eight “Choir Sisters”. In the early years of the Dunedin foundation, the Sisters struggled to come to terms with the “egalitarian” spirit that characterised family life in New Zealand. Few families had or could afford domestic servants.⁶⁷ In the following letter, for example, Sister Francis expresses her surprise (and some admiration) for the housework and childcare responsibilities shared by the families of her young pupils, her concern at the lack of servants and her disapproval of those who considered themselves to be “ladies” in the Colony:

Servants wages are exorbitant, a housemaid 10/- a week; other servants one pound and upwards, so it is no wonder that hardly anyone keeps servants. The mothers and children do all the work and even the fathers take part in minding the baby... when I find fault with any one pupil in the high school for not knowing her lessons, the excuse is Sr. I have to mind the baby when I go home, and mind this child is paying at the rate of eighteen pounds a year, and is a nice lady-like girl... We have met some very good kind people, all dress very well, quite in the fashion, but I don’t believe we have seen a lady in the acceptation of the word since we came here. Indeed I suspect there is scarcely one in the Colony.⁶⁸

In a letter to Sion Hill, Mother Gabriel Gill recounted her attempt to organise a fundraising bazaar, expressing her shock at the rough and ready behaviour of the “chief Catholic Ladies of Dunedin”:

You would laugh if you saw me on last Monday surrounded by all the chief Catholic Ladies of Dunedin, ladies some indeed did not prove themselves such... I had to give an exhortation on Charity, honest and honourable dealings, and such subjects as I never anticipated having to place before a respectable assembly called together for so noble an end as the erection of schools for the benefit of their own children.⁶⁹

In the same letter, however, she details her sense of satisfaction that the wealthier Protestant families were beginning to entrust their daughters to the Dominican day school:

One of the richest and most influential family among them [the Protestants] have entrusted their only daughter to us... in defiance of the Presbyterians who were pleading the cause of the High School... certainly I find the members of the English Church the most respectable and friendly I meet here.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Donald Harman Akenson, *Half the World from Home: Perspectives on the Irish in New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1990). The shortage of domestic servants and their expense can be partly explained by the availability of large numbers of single men wanting to marry, which meant that any period of domestic service tended to be of short duration.

⁶⁸S.M. Francis to Prioress Sion Hill, March 17 1871, DSANZ.

⁶⁹M.M. Gabriel Gill to Sion Hill, “Mothers and Sisters,” November 12 1871.

⁷⁰Ibid.

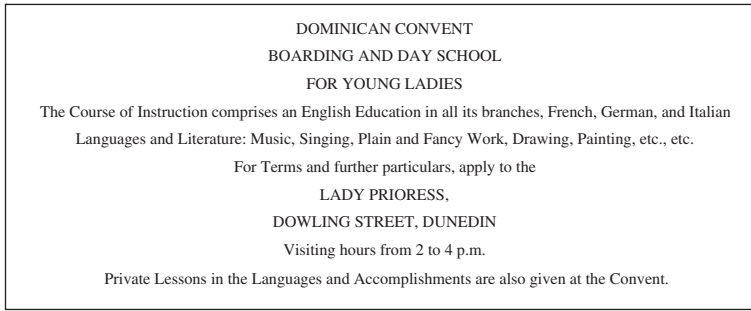


Figure 1. Advertisement in the New Zealand Tablet, 3 May 1873.

Source: McCarthy, 1970, p. 49.

Like their counterparts in Ireland, Dunedin's successful middle-class families sent their daughters to the Dominican Sisters for two reasons: to receive a good Catholic education and to acquire the "accomplishments". A middle-class girl was offered a comprehensive programme containing all the elements of the English language, in comparison to the classical education in Latin, Greek and mathematics considered important in the education of middle-class boys.⁷¹

An indication of the types of accomplishments offered is apparent in Figure 1. The Sisters offered "French, German, and Italian Languages and as well as Literature, Music, Singing, Plain and Fancy Work and Drawing and Painting". As Marjorie Theobald points out, the systematic study of these subjects had potential occupational meaning for many women forced to support themselves, and an education in the accomplishments was an important part of a family's "cultural capital" in contracting a good marriage for a daughter. Thus, it was not seen as useless frippery but as crucial for marriage or work, if necessary, as a governess or teacher.⁷²

Old worlds and new: clashes and compromises

For the New Zealand Dominicans, like their counterparts in Ireland, the education of the higher classes in their select schools provided a source of income to fund the education of the poor.⁷³ It was one way that the impoverished diocese of Dunedin was able to provide education for the growing numbers of working-class Catholics. Catholic faith and morality permeated the academic curriculum. Nevertheless, the realities of teaching in the "free school" in a colonial environment lacking the disciplines of class, and free of the culture of religion that pervaded the Irish homeland, came as a shock to Sister de Ricci, as she explained in a letter to her uncle in 1876:

⁷¹Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-century Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). A study of two Dominican schools in South Australia reveals a similar "accomplishments" curriculum. Stephanie Burley, "None More Anonymous? Catholic Teaching Nuns, their Secondary Schools and Students in South Australia 1880–1925" (Master's thesis, University of Adelaide, 1992).

⁷²Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women*.

⁷³Kealy, OP, *Dominican Education in Ireland*.

As to religion, it is at the very lowest. You would be frightened in speaking to the children, that is even the very best brought up, they have no idea of it, even the name of God seems a strange sound to them, and what is worse they take so little interest in such topics, in fact it is almost impossible to interest them at all. Whilst in worldly matters, they are more clever and wide-awake than the old people at home.⁷⁴

These concerns about the “worldliness” of the children reflect a commonly expressed fear that Irish settlers were ill-equipped to pass on the Catholic faith to their children because of their separation from their homeland and their own lack of education.⁷⁵

The Sisters believed that the answer lay in Catholic schools run by properly trained religious teachers, who could transmit the doctrines and practices of the Catholic faith while providing a basic education for all Catholic pupils.⁷⁶ This rationale was behind Bishop Moran’s insistence on the need for a separate Catholic school system in New Zealand, a school system in which the Dominican Sisters would play a significant role.⁷⁷

As is clear from their letters home to Ireland, the Sisters’ understandings of society, religion and their role as educators in New Zealand were shaped by the social and cultural values that had framed their lives in Ireland. This is illustrated in the stratification of congregational life into choir Sisters and lay Sisters. The primary function of the eight choir Sisters was to “seek and provide for the salvation of souls by the uninterrupted ministry of teaching and preaching”.⁷⁸ They had a voice in Chapter and were able to vote for the election of the Mother Superior and her counsellors. On the other hand, Sister Lucy and Sister Peter, who had entered the Dominican Sisters in Sion Hill as Lay Sisters, were likely to have been girls with a limited education whose families who could not afford a dowry. They wore a distinctive black scapular and took part in a simplified form of the Divine Office, performing a supportive domestic role. They did not have the same rights as the choir Sisters and were generally considered second-class citizens in the hierarchy of the convent.⁷⁹

As Margaret Thompson notes, Old World people brought their cultural traditions, their religious practices and their antipathies with them when they emigrated.⁸⁰ The stratification of the Dominicans into choir and Lay Sisters – a practice that reflected the hierarchical structures of “Old World” European society –

⁷⁴S.M. De Ricci to Dr Kirby, November 22 1876. Irish College Rome Archives (hereafter ICRA).

⁷⁵A Father Hurley expressed these sentiments in an article entitled “Some Reasons why Catholics Lose their Faith in New Zealand,” *Tablet*, July 15 1887.

⁷⁶Jenny Collins, “From ‘Apprentice to Professional’: The Training of New Zealand Catholic Teachers, 1945–1965,” *History of Education Review* 34, no. 2 (2005): 27–40.

⁷⁷Jenny Collins, “Strategies for Survival and Success: Dominican Teachers 1931–1961,” *History of Education Review* 33, no. 1 (2004): 1–13.

⁷⁸*Constitutions of the New Zealand Dominican Sisters under the protection of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary and of St. Catherine of Sienna, 1933*, 24. Auckland Catholic Diocesan Archives (hereafter, ACDA).

⁷⁹Sister Lucy, born Mary Tracy in 1827 in Dublin, had been a lady’s maid before becoming a sister; she had lived for several years in Paris and had a good command of French. Sister Peter, born Anne Jordan in 1849 in Dublin, Ireland, was professed two days after the announcement that she had been chosen to go to Dunedin.

⁸⁰Margaret Susan Thompson, “Sisterhood and Power: Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 25 (1989): 149–75.

was slow to change. However, the Sisters were now teaching pupils whose parents had left Ireland to seek new opportunities in a frontier society that prided itself on its egalitarian values.⁸¹ In such an environment, the “Old World” frameworks that had permitted the division of Dominican religious life into two unequal classes seemed increasingly out of step.⁸²

In the 1870s and 1880s, a number of New Zealand recruits began to join the Dominican Sisters, but as these largely came from the St. Joseph’s free school and were without dowries, they joined the lay Sisters. Gabriel Gill became increasingly concerned with providing teachers for the rapidly expanding educational missions throughout Otago: South Dunedin (1882), Invercargill (1882), Oamaru (1882), Queenstown (1883), Milton (1891), Lawrence (1893), North East Valley (1895) and Cromwell (1899). In 1874, Father Coleman, the assistant to Moran who had accompanied the Sisters on their journey from Ireland, was dispatched to Sion Hill, returning with a number of new recruits. In 1881, Bishop Moran returned from a visit to Ireland with six Sisters. In 1886, Mother Gabriel herself travelled to Sion Hill, setting up a novitiate for the New Zealand foundation at Beaumont. Although the project was short-lived, she returned to New Zealand in 1887 with nine new recruits for the New Zealand mission.⁸³

The second wave of recruits from Sion Hill to Dunedin had similarities to Hoy’s description of the second wave of emigration of Catholic Sisters from Ireland to the United States. The second wave, which lasted from the mid-1870s to about 1914, followed established trails and consisted mostly of younger, more malleable women who were recruited by the pioneering nuns of the first wave.⁸⁴ Following the New Zealand Catholic bishops’ 1877 decision to establish a separate education system, the second wave of Catholic Sisters who travelled to New Zealand usually joined teaching congregations, while the second generation of congregational leaders moved to establish more formal authority relationships with their bishops and clergy – ones that tended to mirror those they knew in Ireland.⁸⁵

⁸¹James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001). James Belich notes that by the 1900s, populist notions of egalitarianism had resulted in public pressure to open up educational opportunities to all sectors of society.

⁸²See “Concerning those received” from *Quinquennial Report of the Congregation of New Zealand Dominican Sisters to Sacred Congregation, 1948–1952*, DSANZ. It took until the late 1940s for the distinction between Lay and Choir Sisters entering Dominican religious life in New Zealand to be abolished.

⁸³Difficulties arose in relation to authority relationships and whose jurisdiction the novitiate was to operate under. Mother Gabriel Gill seems to have alienated Archbishop Walsh (Dublin) with her high-handed approach. The story has all the elements of drama and intrigue and deserves to be told elsewhere.

⁸⁴Hoy, “The Recruitment and Emigration of Irish Religious Women.”

⁸⁵See also Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*; Jenny Collins, “Hidden Lives: The Teaching and Religious Lives of Eight Dominican Sisters, 1931–1961” (Master’s thesis, Massey University, 2001). This pattern is evident in the more formal relationship the Dominican Sisters had with Bishop Michael Verdon, who succeeded Patrick Moran as Bishop of Dunedin in 1896.

Shaping a new educational mission: moving away from the foundation years

In 1890, the Dominican Sisters celebrated the 20th anniversary of their departure from Ireland with the opening of the long-awaited St. Dominic's College building, while their pupils were displaying their achievements at the 1890 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition. Sister de Ricci again reported to her uncle:

The Exhibition has just opened in Dunedin. The children of all our schools have been preparing needlework, painting, drawings, exercise books etc... Everyone seemed to be watching what would be sent in by the Convent and it is gratifying to hear that the Nun's Bay is considered one of the chief attractions of the Exhibition. We are in hopes that it will do much good to religion.⁸⁶

This letter is significant, expressing, as it does, Sister de Ricci's satisfaction with the educational progress of her pupils at a time when Dunedin was beginning to move away from the rawness of its first immigrant generation into a more established and (for many) a more affluent phase. All the Dominican schools that entered the Exhibition were awarded "First Order of Merit" certificates by the visiting judges from Melbourne. As a consequence of this success, Bishop Moran approved the use of the Government syllabus in Catholic schools in the diocese, which he had previously declined.⁸⁷ By the 1890s, pupils were being prepared for the University and Civil Service examinations and in 1892, St. Dominic's introduced Saturday "technical classes" with instruction in cookery, domestic economy and dressmaking.

In 1894, in a move designed to enable Catholic pupils to be awarded the Certificate of Education issued by Education Boards and improve their job prospects, Dominican schools applied successfully to be inspected by the Otago and Southland education boards. In the same year, St. Dominic's became affiliated to the Trinity College of Music. By the mid-1890s, there were 75 Dominican Sisters and eight "mission" houses established throughout Otago and Southland. The Sisters had survived the early years and were about to enter a period of consolidation.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the number of letters between the New Zealand Dominican Sisters and Ireland decreased. The difficult first years were over, the original Sisters grew older, Bishop Moran died in 1895, and in 1899 Mother Gabriel Gill moved to Western Australia to establish a new foundation.⁸⁸ By 1900, the Sisters' connections with Ireland began to reduce as increasing numbers of local recruits were admitted to the New Zealand Congregation. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Sisters started to emerge from their dependence on Ireland and to reshape their educational mission around a new cultural and religious identity. Not surprisingly, some tensions emerged between the "Irish" Sisters and the increasing numbers of New Zealand-born recruits. Sister Louis Keighron, a "second-wave" Irish recruit who had been professed in Sion Hill in 1882, worried about the loss of Irish links:

⁸⁶Sister de Ricci to Dr Kirby, November 27 1889, DSANZ. The Exhibition ran from November 1889 to April 1890.

⁸⁷*Annals St. Dominic's* 1889, gh6/3/8 DSANZ. In the same year Robert Stout, New Zealand's 13th premier and a long-time political adversary of Moran's, sent his daughter, Maia, as a boarder to St. Dominic's College.

⁸⁸In 1899, at the invitation of Bishop Kelly of the diocese of Geraldton in Western Australia, Gabriel Gill set up a new foundation with six Sisters (including Sister De Ricci, one of the original Irish founders). She died there in 1905.

I don't know how we keep together at all. There is not even a typed copy of the Rule in some of our Houses – their communities have to trust to our memories! Oh Mother it is pitiable – and this is not Holy Ireland where the faith is so strong, and traditions so sacred.⁸⁹

The letter is interesting, pointing as it does to key debates among the Sisters about the nature of their mission as they expanded in numbers and established new communities. It is important to remember how much had changed since the original Dunedin foundation in 1871.⁹⁰ Then, 10 Sisters had arrived in New Zealand. They lived in spartan conditions and in this missionary mode had learned to adapt to the conditions they encountered in a raw pioneer society. While some of the Irish Sisters continued to look back to Ireland for their cultural and religious traditions, the increasing numbers of New Zealand-born Sisters saw less reason to be dependent on their connections with the “Old World.” This became apparent as the Sisters gradually shifted the focus of their educational mission to the changing needs of the New Zealand community. From the beginning of the twentieth century, New Zealand-born and Irish postulants were trained in Dunedin, and Dominican schools adopted government standards and textbooks. Inspection of Catholic schools enabled Catholic pupils to enter Government examinations, and thus to gain access to public service occupations. From the 1920s onward, as increasing numbers of pupils entered their secondary schools, the Dominican Sisters gradually moved from the provision of a “select” education in the accomplishments to offering “academic” courses for girls with university ambitions and more “general” courses for those going on to work in the commercial world.

From Dublin to Dunedin: Dominican Sisters in transition

The social and cultural world of the nineteenth-century Irish Dominican Sister was built around what it meant to be Catholic, female, religious and a teacher. As Dominican Sisters, they belonged to an old order with lives largely focused on prayer and the provision of education to the upper and middle classes of the day. Their survival and expansion in Ireland resulted from moves to ensure a successful working relationship with local ecclesiastical authorities and their ability to adapt their educational practice to the changing demographics of nineteenth-century Irish society. Their expansion as a Congregation mirrored that of the “modern” congregations such as the Mercy Sisters, and along with the thousands of Irish Sisters they became educational missionaries to the thousands of Irish emigrants who had moved to New Zealand in search of a better life.

In the early years in the young colony, the Sisters' understanding of their role as educators was shaped by the social and cultural values that had framed their lives in Ireland. However, by 1900, with the adoption of a national curriculum, inspection of Catholic schools and access to Government examinations, the Sisters began to adapt their educational practice to local conditions. At the same time, connections with Ireland diminished as the founders grew older and more local recruits began to

⁸⁹Sister Louis Keighron to Prioress, Sion Hill, June 26 1910, DSANZ.

⁹⁰Part of the following discussion has appeared in Jenny Collins, “Dublin to Dunedin: From ‘Old World’ Frameworks to New Mission Frontiers,” in *Towards the Intelligent Use of Liberty: Dominican Approaches to Education*, ed. Gabriel Kelly, OP, and Kevin Saunders, OP (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004), 279–91.

be admitted to the New Zealand Congregation. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Dominican Sisters had moved from the provision of a “select” education in the “accomplishments” to offering “academic” courses for girls with university ambitions and more “general” courses for those going on to work in the commercial world.

This paper has considered ways in which a previously understudied group of Catholic Sister-Educators learned to adapt their educational and cultural practices to survive and expand in changing political, cultural, and economic circumstances. As educational missionaries, Dominican Sisters played an important role in the establishment of a viable educational system in nineteenth and early twentieth-century New Zealand. Studying their professional and professed lives offers fresh perspectives on an educational historiography that has until now limited its focus to the analysis of developments in state education. By studying the lives of Catholic Sister-Teachers, it is possible to illustrate ways in which nuns have been “central” not only to Catholic history, but also to women’s history, to the history of education and the social history of nations.

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