

Negotiating religious change and conflict: Female religious communities in early modern Ireland, c.1530–c.1641

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This article explores how communities of female religious within the English sphere of influence in Ireland negotiated their survival, firstly in the aftermath of the Henrician dissolution campaigns of the late 1530s and 1540s and thereafter down to the early 1640s. It begins by examining the strategies devised by women religious in order to circumvent the state's proscription of vocational living in the aftermath of the Henrician suppression campaigns. These ranged from clandestine continuation of conventual life to the maintenance of informal religious vows within domestic settings. It then moves on to consider the modes of migration and destinations of Irish women who, from the late sixteenth century onwards, travelled to the Continent in pursuit of religious vocations, an experience they shared with their English counterparts. Finally, it considers how the return to Ireland from Europe of Irish Poor Clare nuns in 1629 signalled the revival of monastic life for women religious on the island. The article traces the importance of familial and clerical patronage networks to the ongoing survival of Irish female religious communities and highlights their role in sustaining Catholic devotional practices, which were to prove vital to the success of the Counter-Reformation mission in seventeenth-century Ireland.

Keywords: Female religious, Irish, Catholicism, Monasticism.

... the King, (having resolved to resume into his hands all the monasteries and religious houses, for their better reformation, to remove from them the religious men and women, and to cause them to return to some honest mode of living, and to the true religion) directs the commissioners to signify this his intention to the heads of the religious houses; to receive their resignations and surrenders willingly tendered ...¹

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¹ James Morris, ed. *Calendar of the Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery in Ireland in the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth*, 3 vols (Dublin: Alex, Thom & Sons, 1861), 1:55.

Integral to the Henrician reform programme in Ireland, as in England, was the dissolution of religious houses.² In Ireland, the majority of monasteries within the orbit of English government influence (greater Leinster and south-east Munster) were suppressed during the late 1530s and early 1540s and their properties secularised. A systematic visitation of religious houses resulted in the resignation of heads and communities (who were pensioned off) and confiscation of their real estate and chattels. The subsequent distribution of properties and rights to tithes and advowsons among the lay élite ensured that the dissolutions and concomitant legislative reforms in respect of religion were met with relative equanimity.³ While the impact of the monastic dissolution campaigns of the late 1530s and early 1540s on Pale society in general has received significant scholarly attention, notably through the work of Brendan Bradshaw, Mary Ann Lyons and Brendan Scott, relatively little is known about the experience of those most affected by the dissolutions in both the immediate and the long-term aftermath, namely the religious themselves.⁴ This is especially true in the case of Irish female religious. For them, like their counterparts across Europe, the suppression of the monasteries was exceptionally disruptive, marking as it did an abrupt end to a formal, cloistered and exclusively female way of religious life, which traced its origins back to the early Christian Church. As Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks has observed in the context of Reformation Europe, the closure of convents suddenly removed women's opportunities for expressing their spirituality in an 'all-female context'.⁵ Unlike male religious, some of whom were later appointed to positions within the hierarchy of the Tudor state church, female religious in Ireland, as in England and Europe, were deprived of their communities and left without any alternative for a vocational life. That possibility would not reappear in any formal sense until the early decades of the seventeenth century.

In the last twenty years scholarship on women religious in post-Reformation Europe has flourished, expanding considerably our knowledge of the nature of female contemplative life and resistance to religious reform. Themes such as the changing nature of female religious expression and women's spiritual work; institutional relations

² For a comprehensive account of the dissolution campaigns in Ireland see Brendan Bradshaw, *Dissolution of the Religious Orders in Ireland under Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Mary Ann Lyons, *Church and Society in County Kildare, c.1480–1547* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000).

³ Bradshaw, *Dissolution of Religious Orders*, 66–98.

⁴ Bradshaw, *Dissolution of Religious Orders*; Lyons, *Church & Society*; Brendan Scott, *Religion and Reformation in the Tudor Diocese of Meath* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006); *idem*, 'The Dissolution of the Religious Houses in the Tudor Diocese of Meath', *Archivium Hibernicum* (hereafter *Arch. Hib.*) 59 (2005): 260–76.

⁵ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Convents Confront the Reformation: Catholic and Protestant Nuns in Germany* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), 11–12.

between convents and male clergy; the cultural production of religious communities; and the lived experiences of women housed in convents, have all featured in studies of Italian, Spanish, French, German and English women religious.⁶ Yet, despite these advances, the study of Irish women religious post-dissolution remains a neglected topic within the broader field of European female monasticism.⁷ Within the context of early modern Irish historiography, the study of women religious (with a few notable exceptions) has received no sustained scholarly analysis.⁸ Furthermore, while we know a great deal about

⁶ Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life, 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *eadem*, 'Wives, Widows and Brides of Christ: Marriage and the Convent in the Historiography of Early Modern Italy', *The Historical Journal* (hereafter *HJ*) 43, no. 1 (Mar. 2000): 233–47; Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (London: Penguin, 2003); Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Jennifer Hillman, *Female Piety and the Catholic Reformation in France* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014); Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montréal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001); *eadem*, *The Dévotes: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montréal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1993); Wiesner-Hanks, *Convents Confront the Reformation*; Charlotte Woodford, *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Simone Laqua-O'Donnell, *Women and the Counter-Reformation in Early Modern Münster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Amy E. Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); *eadem*, 'Female Religious Orders', in Ro Po-chia Hsia, ed. *A Companion to the Reformation World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 237–54; Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly, eds. *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800: Communities, Culture and Identity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Caroline Bowden, 'The English Convents in Exile and Questions of National Identity, c.1600–1688' in David Worthington, ed. *British and Irish Emigrants and Exiles in Europe* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 297–341; *eadem*, 'Building Libraries in Exile: The English Convents and their Book Collections in the Seventeenth Century', *British Catholic History* (hereafter *BCH*) 32, 3 (May 2015): 343–82; Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600–1800: Early Modern 'Convents of Pleasure'* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

⁷ Indeed one recent edited volume overlooks the Irish context entirely: Cordula Van Wyhe, ed. *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁸ Marie-Louise Coolahan, *Women, Writing and Language in Early Modern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially chp. one; *eadem*, 'Archipelagic Identities in Europe: Irish Nuns in English Convents', in Bowden and Kelly, eds. *The English Convents in Exile*, 211–28; Bernadette Cunningham, 'The Poor Clare Order in Ireland', in Edel Bhreathnach, Joseph Mac Mahon OFM and John McCafferty, eds. *The Irish Franciscans, 1534–1990* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 159–74; *eadem*, "Bethlehem": The Dillons and The Poor Clare Convent at Ballinaclyffey, County Westmeath', *Aitrebh: Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement Newsletter* (hereafter *Aitrebh*) 17 (2012–13): 5–9; *eadem*, 'Nuns and their Networks in Early Modern Galway', in Salvador Ryan and Clodagh Tait, eds. *Religion and Politics in Urban Ireland, c.1500–c.1750: Essays in Honour of Colm Lennon* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016), 156–72; Andrea Knox, 'The Convent as Cultural Conduit: Irish Matronage in Early Modern Spain', *Quidditas: The Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 30 (2009): 128–40; *eadem*, 'Nuns on the Periphery?: Irish Dominican Nuns and Assimilation in Lisbon', in Flöcel Sabate i Curull and Luis Adno da Fonseca, eds. *Catalonia and Portugal: The Iberian Peninsula from the Periphery* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2015), 311–26; *eadem*, 'Her Book-Lined Cell: Irish Nuns and

Irish men who migrated to the Continent in pursuit of religious vocations from the late 1570s and 1580s onwards, and about their subsequent contribution to the Irish Catholic mission during the early decades of the seventeenth century, by contrast relatively little is known about the female experience.⁹

This article begins to address that lacuna in existing scholarship by exploring how communities of female religious within the English sphere of influence in Ireland negotiated their survival, firstly in the aftermath of the Henrician dissolution campaigns of the late 1530s and 1540s and thereafter down to 1641. Of course, the lives of women religious are often a poorly documented and therefore obscure aspect of early modern Irish, English and European history. This is especially true in the case of Irish women religious, for whom no body of evidence comparable to that available for their English or European counterparts exists.¹⁰ Nonetheless, fleeting references in a range of contemporary sources, such as state papers, martyrologies, chronicles, reports generated by officials of church and state, as well as family papers and genealogies, reveal that despite suppression, religious vocation options for women in Ireland were not wholly eliminated. Rather, they continued throughout the later Tudor and early-to-mid Stuart period, albeit in modified, clandestine and less formal manners. This article begins by examining the mechanisms and strategies devised by women religious in order to circumvent the state's proscription of vocational living in the aftermath of the Henrician dissolution campaigns. These ranged from clandestine continuation of conventual life to the maintenance of informal religious vows within domestic contexts. It then moves on to consider the modes of migration and destinations of Irish women who, from the late sixteenth century onwards, travelled to the Continent in pursuit of formal religious vocations, an experience they shared with their English counterparts. Finally, it considers how the return to Ireland from Spanish Flanders of a cohort of Irish Poor Clare nuns in 1629

the Development of Texts, Translation and Literacy in Late Medieval Spain', in Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara and Patricia Stoop, eds. *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue* (Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 67–86.

⁹ Thomas O'Connor, 'Irish Franciscan Networks at Home and Abroad, 1607–1640' in Worthington, ed. *British & Irish Emigrants*, 279–96; Thomas O'Connor and Mary Ann Lyons, eds. *Irish Migrants in Europe after Kinsale, 1602–1820* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); *idem*, eds. *Irish Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006); *idem*, eds. *Strangers to Citizens: The Irish in Europe, 1600–1800* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008); *idem*, eds. *The Ulster Earls and Baroque Europe: Refashioning Irish Identities, 1600–1800* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009).

¹⁰ As Brendan Bradshaw has highlighted, numerous visitation records for English monasteries from 1534–36 survive and can form the basis of assessments of the state of English monasticism immediately preceding suppression. In Ireland, because no visitations could take place due to the Kildare rebellion (1534–37) 'no body of evidence comparable to that available for English monasteries' exists: see Bradshaw, *Dissolution of Religious Orders*, 17.

signalled the revival of formal monastic life for women religious on the island, in line with the doctrines of the Council of Trent. It examines how, notwithstanding efforts on the part of government authorities to suppress female religious communities, a network of Poor Clare convents in Ireland in fact expanded in the period down to 1641. Contextualised against a backdrop of accelerating, albeit intermittent, spells of state action against recusancy, this article traces the importance of familial and clerical patronage networks to the ongoing survival of Irish female religious communities and highlights their hitherto unrecognised role in sustaining distinctly Catholic devotional practices, which were to prove vital to the success of the Counter-Reformation mission in Ireland during the early decades of the seventeenth century.

Female religious communities in late medieval Ireland

As Dianne Hall in her investigation of convents in medieval Ireland has revealed, women's religious institutions, like those of their male counterparts, were not autonomous entities; rather they played an active role in the political, cultural and social life of the English Pale in the later Middle Ages. Challenging misconceptions about the relative obscurity of enclosed communities of women religious, Hall demonstrates that, in spite of enforced claustration within physical and ideological boundaries, interactions between convents and lay communities in late medieval Ireland were multiple and diverse. Female religious houses in both the English controlled Pale and Gaelic Ireland provided important services to their local communities, including education and poor relief.¹¹ James Murray has shown that within the Pale heartland, schools attached to religious institutions, including convents, were actively involved in preserving and propagating English social and cultural mores.¹² For example, on the eve of its dissolution, in May 1539, the convent of Grace Dieu in north County Dublin was commended to Henry VIII's chief secretary, Thomas Cromwell (d. 1540), by the Irish lord deputy, Lord Leonard Grey (d. 1541) because of its 'value in educating the men, women and children of the Englishry'.¹³ These sentiments were

¹¹ Dianne Hall, *Women and the Church in Medieval Ireland, c.1140–1540* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); see also *eadem*, 'The Nuns of the Medieval Convent of Lismullin, County Meath, and their Connections', *Ríocht na Midhe* (hereafter *Ri. na Midhe*) 10 (1999): 58–70 and *eadem*, 'Towards a Prosopography of Nuns in Medieval Ireland', *Arch. Hib.* 53 (1999): 3–15.

¹² James Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation in Ireland: Clerical Resistance and Political Conflict in the Diocese of Dublin, 1534–1590* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 67.

¹³ Charles MacNeill, 'Accounts of Sums Realised by Sales of Chattels of some Suppressed Irish Monasteries', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* (hereafter *R.S.A.I. Jn.*) sixth series, 12, no. 1 (June 1922): 17; Patrick F. Moran, *History of the Catholic Archbishops of Dublin since the Reformation* (Dublin and London: James Duffy, 1864), 18.

reiterated in a letter from the Irish council requesting that six houses be exempt from dissolution, among them Grace Dieu, because ‘in them young men and childer, both gentlemen childer and other, both of man kind and women kind, be brought up in virtue, learning and in the English tongue and behaviour’.¹⁴ The Augustinian convent of St Brigit at Odder in County Meath fulfilled a similar function and maintained, as late as 1530, a boarding school for young boys, for which service it received a pension from the crown.¹⁵ In her study of monastic dissolutions in County Kildare, Mary Ann Lyons has demonstrated that convents such as the Augustinian houses at Timolin and Graney on the Kildare-Carlow border also served as valuable defence fortresses for local communities, located as they were on the Pale marches. As Lyons highlights, post-dissolution, their premises were to acquire importance as outposts from which the Dublin administration could colonise outlying Gaelic territories.¹⁶ In common with male religious houses, convents performed important spiritual services, contributing to a vibrant late medieval piety; indeed in many cases their premises were the epicentre of parochial religious observance.¹⁷ The relationship between religious houses and lay communities was often a reciprocal one, with female religious, like their male counterparts, relying on generous donations of money and/or land by pious lay patrons, many of them women.¹⁸

Within the Pale heartland, convents were typically patronised by families of gentry and noble status, and drew their personnel from families of that rank. Indeed the wealth and status of a convent was usually commensurate with the socio-economic status of its membership. Thus, Margaret Cusack, ‘a gentle woman of good and auncient house’, and last abbess of the priory of Augustinian nuns at Lismullen, County Meath (the second wealthiest convent in Ireland at the time of the suppression) was sister to Sir Thomas Cusack (d. 1571), alderman of Dublin and later chancellor of Ireland.¹⁹ Similarly, the wealthy Kilculliheen convent, located on the Kilkenny-Waterford border, was home to Abbess Elicia Butler, sister to Piers Butler (c.1467–1539), eighth earl of Ormond and effective controller of the

¹⁴ Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation*, 67.

¹⁵ Newport B. White, ed. *Extents of Irish Monastic Possessions, 1540–1541, from Manuscripts in the Public Record Office, London* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1943), 73, 261.

¹⁶ Lyons, *Church & Society*, 112–20.

¹⁷ The church of St Mary Grace Dieu was described as the parish church ‘from time immemorial’. The monastery church of Odder was also the parochial church while the chapel of the nunnery of Lismullen performed the function of parish church: see White, ed. *Extents of Irish Monastic Possessions*, 73, 261.

¹⁸ However, as Hall’s study demonstrates, women’s patronage does not appear to have particularly favoured female institutions over men’s: see Hall, *Women & the Church*, 42.

¹⁹ Herbert D. Gallwey, ‘The Cusack Family of Counties Meath and Dublin’, *The Irish Genealogist* (hereafter *Ir. Geneal.*) 5 (1979): 673–84.

vast Ormond territories in the south-east of Ireland.²⁰ Due to the dearth of sources, it is not possible to ascertain the precise proximity of the relationships that existed between most members of female religious institutions—especially novices for whom even sparser records survive—and lay communities. However, in cases where surnames are known, it is clear that the religious were drawn from families of significant social standing, many of whom also had clergy serving in the same diocese. For example, in County Louth, Alison Plunkett (d. 1535), abbess of Termonfeckin, was undoubtedly a member of the prominent Plunkett family of Loughcrew in Meath (of whom Thomas Plunkett (c.1440–1519) was chief justice of the common pleas in the late fifteenth century).²¹ Katherine Mothing, from Kilculliheen convent, who is thought to have succeeded Elicia Butler as abbess sometime before 1541, was from the prominent Mothing family of whom Nicholas Mothing (d. 1568), chancellor of St. Canice's Cathedral, was a member.²² In this way, women who did not marry contributed towards augmenting their family's fortunes and political fortitude by occupying often powerful and lucrative positions in local religious houses. In the post-dissolution era, these ties were essential in enabling families to retain possession of property formerly owned by religious houses that had been under the supervision of their female relatives.

On the eve of the dissolution campaigns in 1539, no less than thirty female religious institutions were in operation in Ireland, ten of which were located within the English sphere of influence in Ireland (Leinster and south-east Munster), the vast majority following the Augustinian rule.²³ By 1542, following a systematic visitation of religious houses and the resignation of heads and communities (who were pensioned off), the majority of these houses had been formally dissolved.²⁴ Post-dissolution, the options for female religious in Ireland, as in England and Europe, were limited. One option was to re-enter secular society and marry (although according to Patricia Crawford, this was not the prevailing trend among women religious following the closure of monasteries in England).²⁵ In other cases, women returned to their

²⁰ For a full discussion of Elicia Butler see Hall, *Women & the Church*, 191–200. See also John Mulholland, ed. 'The Trial of Alice Butler, Abbess of Kilculliheen', *Old Waterford Society: Decies* (hereafter *Decies*) 25 (Jan. 1984): 45–6.

²¹ Stephen B. Barnwell, 'Plunkett of Loughcrew', *Ir. Geneal.* 5, no. 4 (Nov. 1977): 422–7.

²² Nicholas Mothing was buried in St Canice's Cathedral: see Hall, *Women & the Church*, 197.

²³ Based on the table compiled by Dianne Hall in *Women & the Church*, 207–10.

²⁴ In Gaelic Ireland (south-west Munster, Connacht and Ulster) the majority of houses were suppressed by the mid-1540s, although reflecting the absence of effective crown jurisdiction in this region, three convents (two in Connacht and one in Ulster) were not formally dissolved until the 1560s, while two others (both in Connacht) remained standing as late as the 1590s: see Hall, *Women & the Church*, 207–10.

²⁵ In England where marriage was legal for women religious after 1549, only 19 per cent of former nuns in the city of Lincoln married: see Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500–1720* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 30.

relatives and continued to live their religious vocations secretly in the homes of family members, sometimes awaiting opportunities to travel to Catholic regions of Europe in order to join religious communities.²⁶ In the absence of surviving documentary evidence, it is not possible to determine what ultimately became of the majority of women religious compelled to leave their houses after 1539. What is clear, however, is that despite official suppression and in direct opposition to crown mandates, some female religious communities, continued to observe formal religious lifestyles and remained living communally together in their former monastic properties.

Strategies for survival after dissolution

The best-documented case of the survival of a community of women religious post-dissolution is that of the Grace Dieu convent, located in the parish of Lusk, a rural area with good agricultural land, situated in north County Dublin. A Norman establishment run by canonesses of St Augustine, on the eve of its dissolution Grace Dieu was a vibrant and wealthy establishment which played a central role in performing important spiritual services within the local community. The convent held an apparently eminent position as a bastion of English civility and learning. This coupled with its favourable location (situated within the Pale maghery), meant that there was significant competition among members of the lay and ecclesiastical élite for a share in the convent's lands and properties. Among those keen to petition (although unsuccessfully) for the lucrative holdings of Grace Dieu was Archbishop George Browne (d. c.1556), a prominent advocate of the government's reform programme and himself a member of the ecclesiastical commission for the suppression of the monasteries.²⁷

In October 1539 the convent was officially suppressed when the abbess, Alison White, surrendered it with the consent of the nuns. In March 1540 she was granted a pension of £6 annually. Four other nuns, Margaret Cestre, Thomasina Dermen, Katherine Eustace and Alison Fitzsimon, received pensions of 50s. each per annum.²⁸ In July 1543, the lands and manors of Grace Dieu were granted to Sir Patrick Barnewall of Turvey, north County Dublin, the king's serjeant-at-law and (significantly) one of the commissioners appointed to oversee the

²⁶ In Germany in the 1520s Sophia Buchner, a former nun from Eisleben, near Leipzig, was reported to be a living a celibate life in Leipzig with her elderly mother and a female servant: see Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, *From Priest's Whore to Pastor's Wife: Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 142: see also Leonard, *Nails in the Wall*, 4–5.

²⁷ Brendan Bradshaw, 'George Browne, First Reformation Archbishop of Dublin, 1536–54' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (hereafter *JEH*) 21 (1970): 301–26.

²⁸ Aubrey Gwynn and R. N. Hadcock (eds), *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland. With an Appendix to Early Sites* (Harlow: Longmans, 1970), 317.

suppression campaigns.²⁹ In a clear case of orchestrated survivalism, and in collusion with Barnewall, the grantee, following their suppression the Grace Dieu nuns relocated to Portrane rectory, part of the original manor of Grace Dieu, bringing their chaplain with them. Over thirty years later, according to an inquisition report dated October 1577, the Grace Dieu nuns remained living communally at Portrane together with their chaplain.³⁰ There they continued to observe traditional devotional practices and to assert their right to celebrate divine office in the local parish church, which, according to the 1541 extents (surveys of monastic property in crown possession), had been, 'from time immemorial the centre of parochial observance'.³¹

A number of factors facilitated the survival of the Grace Dieu nuns down to 1577. The support of the local lay community was undoubtedly vital in enabling them to continue living communally in their former property. According to the 1577 report, the land and properties of Portrane, including the nuns' dwelling place and the parish church were then held by a lay woman named Isabelle Walshe 'by demise from ye prioress' before the dissolution. The report also stated that another woman, Beale White, a widow, possibly a relative of Alison White, 'enjoyed ye said rectory and mansion [of Portrane], by a demise from ye prioress'.³² These cleverly orchestrated property transactions proved vitally important, allowing lay women to lend material support to religious and circumvent the government's efforts at reform. It is very likely that the nuns benefited from the support and patronage of the wealthy and politically influential Barnewalls of Turvey. By the 1570s Sir Christopher Barnewall (d. 1575), son and heir of Sir Patrick Barnewall—the original grantee of Grace Dieu—was part of an emerging cohort of Old English élite, who, becoming increasingly alienated from the Dublin administration, were self-consciously aligning themselves with practices of the 'old' Catholic faith. During the late 1560s and early 1570s both Christopher and his wife, Marion née Sherle (or Churley) sheltered proscribed priests at their home, including the exiled English cleric Edmund Campion (1540–81), who resided with the couple at their Turvey abode in spring 1571 before departing to undertake clerical training

²⁹ As well as obtaining the properties of Grace Dieu, Barnewall also received the Carmelite house at Knocktopher in County Kilkenny (1542), and some of the possessions of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin (1547): see C.J. Woods, 'Barnewall, Sir Patrick', in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (hereafter *DIB*) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), online, <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a0388#> (accessed 7 Feb. 2015).

³⁰ Mervyn Archdall, *Monasticon Hibernicum, or, A History of the Abbies Priors and other Religious Houses in Ireland*, 2 vols (Dublin: W.B. Kelly, 1873–6), 2: 85–6.

³¹ The surveys were taken by a royal commission appointed by the Irish lord deputy Sir Anthony St. Leger (1496?–1559). For a discussion, see White, ed. *Extents of Irish Monastic Possessions*, iii. For quote, see *ibid*, 73.

³² Archdall, *Monasticon Hibernicum*, 2: 86.

at Douai.³³ Furthermore, the marriage alliances orchestrated by the couple for their many offspring serve as unambiguous indications of what would become in later decades very firm and overt Catholic sympathies of the family.³⁴ Indeed Patrick Barnewall (1531?–1622), Christopher and Marion's son, was later described by the English polemicist Barnaby Rich (c.1542–1617) as one of the leading supporters of 'popery' in Ireland.³⁵

From the late 1570s onwards, however, as political tensions heightened and the pace of religious reform under the Elizabethan regime in Ireland accelerated, the feasibility of continuing a traditional cloistered life was undermined and the Grace Dieu community at Portrane appears to have finally ceased to exist. The exact time of the sisters' ultimate disbandment is unknown but it clearly occurred soon after 1577, the date of the last record of the community.³⁶ Whether members of Grace Dieu simply died or the group was formally suppressed by the authorities is unclear. The timing of their demise is revealing, however. In contrast to an atmosphere of relative toleration and leniency that prevailed in Ireland during the early years of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, the late 1570s and early 1580s heralded a more vigorous push for religious conformity on the part of the state authorities.³⁷ The outbreak of the Desmond rebellions (1569–73; 1579–83) in Munster, in the south-east of the country, and the Baltinglass (1580) and Nugent (1581) revolts in Leinster, in the Pale heartland, all staged under the guise of religious crusades, meant that the government was on increasingly high alert about the security of Ireland, and by extension England.³⁸ Thus, from the early 1570s to the

³³ Colm Lennon, *Richard Stanihurst: the Dubliner, 1547–1618* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1981), 32.

³⁴ John Kingston, 'Catholic Families of the Pale', *Reportorium Novum* (hereafter *Rep. Novum*) 1 (1956): 336–41.

³⁵ 'Barnaby Rich's 'Remembrances of the State of Ireland, 1612': With Notices of other Manuscript Reports by the Same Writer on Ireland under James the First', ed. C. Litton Falkiner in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (hereafter *R.I.A. Proc.*) 26, section c (1906): 140–1.

³⁶ Gwynn & Hadcock, eds. *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland*, 317.

³⁷ As James Murray has discussed, whereas during the early years of Elizabeth's reign '... the queen and her councillors were quick to encourage the formulation of practical reformist policy ... they were also extremely tentative about supporting its implementation in Ireland, particularly if it threatened to alienate sections of the loyal community or to disrupt the government of the realm, as in the secular sphere, the imposition of the cess had so recently done in the Pale': see Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation*, 263. On the periodisation of enforcing religious coercion in Ireland during the late sixteenth century, see *ibid.*, 1–19.

³⁸ Christopher Maginn, 'The Baltinglass Rebellion, 1580: English Dissent or a Gaelic Uprising?', *HJ* 47, no. 2 (2004): 205–32; Ciarán Brady, 'Faction and the Origins of the Desmond Rebellion of 1579', *Irish Historical Studies* (hereafter *IHS*) 22, no. 88 (1980): 289–312; Helen Coburn-Walsh, 'The Rebellion of William Nugent, 1581', in R.V. Comerford, Mary Cullen, Jacqueline Hill and Colm Lennon, eds. *Religion, Conflict and Coexistence: Essays presented to Monsignor Patrick Corish* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1990), 26–52; Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation*, 310–17.

mid-1580s efforts on the part of the Elizabethan authorities to enforce more stringently conformity to the Established Church intensified (a process inextricably linked with attempts to subdue the country and bring it under royal writ), taking the form of coercive measures, including the imposition of fines, imprisonments and on occasion, summary executions.³⁹

Significantly, it was also during this period of increased coercion that at least one woman suspected of being a religious was singled out for punishment by the state authorities. According to a martyrological account written by the Wexford-born Jesuit John Howlin (1543/4–99), in 1580, just three years after the disbandment of the clandestine Grace Dieu community, one of its members, Margery Barnewall, was arrested and brought before ecclesiastical commissioners, including Adam Loftus (1533/4–1605), Lord Chancellor of Ireland and Archbishop of Dublin (1567–1605), who questioned her on her style of living. After a spell of incarceration in a Dublin gaol, Margery fled Ireland and with financial support from her family later escaped to St Malo in northern France. According to Howlin's account, after reaching France, Margery continued to live out her religious vocation on the Continent, spending time at Compostella in northern Spain before travelling to Rome in c.1583 where she died at an unknown date. It was during her time in Rome that she met the Irish Jesuit and related to him an account of her experiences, which Howlin later preserved in his martyrology.⁴⁰

Entitled 'Perbreve compendium', Howlin's martyrology was compiled sometime between c.1589 and 1599, while he was living in Lisbon. His manuscript account contains, in total, forty-five instances of an individual or group whose profession of their religion caused them to suffer some form of deprivation, including exile, torture or spells of imprisonment from the mid-1570s to the late 1580s. Whether or not they had died on the scaffold, all were regarded as martyrs for Catholicism. The importance of Howlin's work lies not only in its being the first early modern Irish martyrology; it also provides the first record of the life and death of the 'martyr' and religious woman Margery Barnewall, one of only two women included in Howlin's compilation (the other being lay woman Margaret Ball née

³⁹ Colm Lennon, 'Recusancy and Counter-Reformation', in John R. Bartlett and Stuart D. Kinsella, eds. *Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Ireland: Lectures delivered in Christ Church Cathedral Dublin, 2001–2002* (Dublin: Columba, 2006), 119–32.

⁴⁰ John Howlin, 'Perbreve compendium, in quo continentur nonnullorum nomina, qui in Hybernia regnante impia Elizabetha, vincula, martirium et exilium perpassi sunt' (hereafter 'Perbreve compendium'): the manuscript was preserved in the Irish college at Salamanca until the 1950s when it was taken to St Patrick's College, Maynooth where it is now classified as Maynooth, Salamanca MSS, SP/11/6/1, legajo xi, no. 4. It is printed in Patrick F. Moran, ed. *Spicilegium Ossoriense: Being a Collection of Original Letters and Papers Illustrative of the History of the Irish Church from the Reformation to 1800*, 4 vols (Dublin: W.B. Kelly, 1874), 1:82–109.

Bermingham (*fl.* c.1515–84)).⁴¹ Howlin's martyrology formed part of what Colm Lennon has identified as an 'Irish Catholic literary effusion', developing on the Continent during the late 1580s and 1590s, which involved an 'organised, systematic deployment of hagiography and martyrology, genres that were to canalize so much of the devotion and zeal of the European Counter-Reformation', and which were to prove vital to the formation of an Irish Catholic religious identity, both on the Continent and in Ireland.⁴² Although, in the short-term, the manuscript account of the life and death of Margery Barnewall penned by Howlin would have reached a relatively limited audience, his work was to have an enduring impact, and set the tone for Irish martyrologists writing in the seventeenth century, among them the Kilkenny-born cleric, David Rothe (1573–1650), later bishop of Ossory (1620–50), who, drawing largely on Howlin's earlier compilation, included an extended account of Margery Barnewall's life and death in his later printed martyrology, *De Processu Martyriali*, published at Cologne in 1619.⁴³ The immediate circumstances which led to the composition of Howlin's martyrology was the enforcement of vigorous anti-Catholic measures by the Elizabethan government in Ireland from the mid-1570s to the late 1580s. Consequently, the language deployed in Howlin's account, shaped as it was by the generic requirements of traditional martyrology, is replete with sectarian polemic which construes events in Ireland as a conflict between exemplars of Catholic zeal and constancy—in this case the devout religious, Margery Barnewall—and the structures and agents of a persecutory state and 'heretical' state church, personified by Adam Loftus. Central to Howlin's construction of Barnewall's martyrdom was her virginity, highlighting her exalted status within the Roman Catholic Church tradition. Howlin described her as a 'noble virgin' who 'dedicated her virginity from her earliest years to God'. Professed at the age of thirty by an unnamed Catholic bishop (Howlin does not indicate where), at some point during the 1570s, Margery 'joined a company of chaste and honest women, and devout

⁴¹ For an account of the martyr Margaret Ball née Bermingham see Bronagh Ann McShane, 'The Roles and Representations of Women in Religious Change and Conflict in Leinster and South-East Munster, c.1560–c.1641' (PhD Thesis, Maynooth University, 2015), chp. one.

⁴² Colm Lennon, 'Taking Sides: The Emergence of Irish Catholic Ideology', in Vincent P. Carey and Ute Lotz-Heumann, eds. *Taking Sides?: Colonial and Confessional Mentalités in Early Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 79.

⁴³ Regarded as the definitive study of the Irish martyrs in the early modern period, Rothe's *De Processu Martyriali* (Cologne, 1619) would propel the account of the Elizabethan Irish martyrs, including Margery Barnewall and Margaret Ball, to a much larger Continental European audience. For an account of the early modern Irish martyrological tradition see Alan Ford, 'Martyrdom, History and Memory in Early Modern Ireland', in Ian McBride, ed. *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43–66 and Lennon, 'Taking Sides', 78–93.

virgins'.⁴⁴ While not mentioned explicitly by Howlin, it is almost certain that Margery Barnewall was affiliated to the Grace Dieu community and that her arrest in 1580 was part of a wider campaign against Catholic recusancy which targeted both men and women (although to a lesser degree) suspected of engaging in illegal religious activity. While it is not possible to ascertain the precise proximity of the relationship—if any—that existed between Margery Barnewall and the Barnewalls of Turvey, proprietors of Grace Dieu, her family were quite clearly wealthy since they had the means to fund the young woman's hastened escape abroad.

The survival of the Grace Dieu Augustinian community at Portrane down to the late 1570s was representative of a wider movement of Catholic survivalism, one which was crucial to maintaining the ethos and structure of the monastic order in Ireland during the generation after the suppression campaigns. The continued existence of the Grace Dieu community demonstrates that the opportunity for women to fulfil a conventual vocation in Ireland, while severely limited, was not entirely eradicated owing to the patronage of at least one influential gentry family in the Pale region. Of course the women's position as members of the élite, and their connections to members of the government administration, were crucial to their continued survival. Whereas the survival of the Grace Dieu religious community was, in an Irish context at least, unique, within a wider European context, it is perhaps less exceptional. Indeed the Grace Dieu community's resistance to monastic suppression bears striking similarities to the reluctance demonstrated by a number of Dominican convents in the German city of Strasbourg. As Amy E. Leonard reveals in her study of Dominican nuns in early modern Germany, in spite of repeated attempts at suppression by civil authorities, a number of convents in Strasbourg avoided secularisation and remained lively institutions of Catholic devotional practice throughout the sixteenth century. Central to their survival, as Leonard points out, was the nuns' connections with prominent members of the city's municipal administration.⁴⁵ In her study of religious communities in post-dissolution England, Mary C. Erler has highlighted how, as late as 1551, Benedictine nuns at Winchester in Hampshire remained living communally together in the cathedral close and, in one particularly overt manifestation of resistance, continued to don their habits in public.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Howlin, 'Perbreve compendium'.

⁴⁵ Following the onset of the Protestant Reformation from 1524, convents in the German city of Strasbourg survived and persisted in Catholic religious practices throughout the sixteenth century, despite the city council ruling for their closure: see Leonard, *Nails in the Wall*, 5–10.

⁴⁶ Mary C. Erler, *Reading and Writing during the Dissolution: Monks, Friars and Nuns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8.

Third Order tertiaries

The survival of the Grace Dieu community was one mechanism by which Irish female religious resisted state enforcement of religious reform in the decades after 1540. Another form of resistance was to seek a mode of living that was alternative to the cloistered monastic model. Scattered evidence suggests the existence of a growing number of groups of female (and male) communities based in towns and cities such as Drogheda, Dublin, Limerick and Galway, who lived as Third Order tertiaries under 'simple' vows from about the 1560s onwards. The expansion of these types of female communities in Ireland was part of a wider European phenomenon in which orders of female tertiaries flourished, particularly in France where, as Susan E. Dinan has observed, intense religious warfare and famine promoted their development.⁴⁷ Unlike the solemn vows undertaken by professed nuns, tertiaries did not observe formal religious vows that would have subjected them to the rules of the cloister. Instead, they practised what Silvia Evangelisti has described as 'a socially orientated form of commitment, fostering an active spirituality in direct contact with the world, rather than pure contemplation'.⁴⁸ In Ireland, the observant mendicant reforms of the mid-fifteenth century heralded the foundation of dozens of houses of lay tertiaries, or Third Order, both male and female, under the auspices of orders such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans, in line with developments on the Continent.⁴⁹ These female communities of lay tertiaries that re-emerged in Irish towns and cities from the 1560s onwards represented remnants of these late medieval institutions and therefore served as an important element of continuity in the interstices between late medieval piety and the apostolate of the Catholic revival.

This uncloistered female apostolate was active in Limerick during the 1560s when a woman named Helen Stackpole established a group called the *Mena Bochta* (Poor Women) in the city. The Stackpoles were one of the leading patrician families in early modern Limerick whose patronage of education and pious initiatives, such as the foundation of chantries and confraternities, was to prove vital to the success of the Counter-Reformation mission in the city during the Elizabethan and early Stuart eras.⁵⁰ While evidence for the activities of

⁴⁷ Dinan, *Women & Poor Relief*, 31.

⁴⁸ Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life*, 201.

⁴⁹ Reaching Ireland from the Continent, the movement first gained momentum in Gaelic territories during the mid-fifteenth century, winning the support of an increasing number of existing religious communities and leading to a proliferation in new foundations. As the century progressed, the reform began to infiltrate the colonial area where it continued to make substantial gains until thwarted by the dissolution campaigns of the 1530s and 1540s: see Bradshaw, *Dissolution of Religious Orders*, 8–16.

⁵⁰ Colm Lennon, *The Urban Patriciates of Early Modern Ireland: A Case Study of Limerick*, (NUI O'Donnell Lecture, Dublin: National University of Ireland, 1999), 16.

the *Mena Bochta* is scant, they were clearly involved in charitable endeavours including administering to the poor. Their community also appears to have been closely affiliated to the Jesuits, who from the 1560s onwards were developing a significant presence in Limerick city.⁵¹ This was a trend reflected in post-Reformation Europe too where the Jesuits supported Ursuline nuns and other congregations of women religious, such as the Mary Ward sisters, who pursued a more active community based apostolate.⁵²

In County Louth, in the north east of the country, a group of female tertiaries were living in Drogheda from at least the early years of the seventeenth century. This group consisted of two or three unmarried women, who belonged to the Third Order of St Francis. Having taken simple vows they lived together under the rule and care of the Franciscans in a house with a small chapel attached. Regarded as devout and highly esteemed by the local community, the women were drawn from elite families in the surrounding area, most likely the Peppards, the Plunketts and the Taaffes, all of whom by the early seventeenth century were outwardly recusant.⁵³ As had been the case with the discovery and suppression of the Grace Dieu nuns during the late 1570s, another phase of intensified and deliberate state action to unearth and eradicate recusancy in the Pale resulted in the discovery of this clandestine community. About 1606, during the period of the coercive 'mandate' campaigns, initiated by Lord Deputy Arthur Chichester (1563–1625) and aimed at enforcing conformity to the Established Church⁵⁴, their house and chapel was raided by Henry Ussher (1550–1613), Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and a zealous enforcer of the government's reform programme. According to one official report while out 'secretly ... searchinge of pristis', Ussher, 'by chaunce' 'broke up a doore wherein two or three nuns did dwell (at the bak), [where] there was a littill chappell wher the friers did

⁵¹ Dinan, *Women & Poor Relief*, 31.

⁵² Laurence Lux-Sterritt, 'Mary Ward's English Institute: The Apostolate as Self-Affirmation', *Recusant History* (hereafter *Rec. Hist.*) 28, no. 2 (2006): 192–208; *eadem*, 'An Analysis of the Controversy Caused by Mary Ward's Institute in the 1620s', *Rec. Hist.* 25, no. 4 (2001): 636–47.

⁵³ Reginald Walsh, ed. 'Persecution of Catholics in Drogheda, in 1606, 1607 and 1611. From a Contemporary Manuscript Preserved in the Irish College Salamanca, Carton 40', *Arch. Hib.* 6 (1917): 67–8; Brendan Jennings, ed. *Wadding papers, 1614–38* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1953), 35.

⁵⁴ During his tenure as lord deputy, Chichester attempted to 'ascertain the limits to which he could push his authority'. The most significant measure he enforced was the 'mandates policy' on which he embarked in 1605–6. Under this prerogative procedure, a series of 'mandates' or instructions were issued requiring sixteen prominent Dublin Catholics to attend worship in the Established Church. The mandates were disregarded and fines and periods of imprisonment imposed on the recusants. The Pale gentry petitioned Chichester, who imprisoned several instigators of the petition. Further mandates were issued and duly ignored before the London administration intervened in late January 1606: see Raymond Gillespie, 'Chichester, Arthur' in *DIB*, online, <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a1642> (accessed 19 Jan. 2015).

sai mass'.⁵⁵ While the report does not indicate whether or not the women were apprehended following their discovery, the clandestine community appears to have continued to operate. In 1623, according to one papal report, 'virgins' who had taken 'simple vows' had been living in Drogheda for some years under the special care of the Franciscans.⁵⁶ Another account claimed that, as late as 1641, there remained at Drogheda 'a well-known house of devout ladies, very virtuous and retired gentlewomen of good birth' who 'wore the habit of the third order of our holy father Saint Francis'.⁵⁷

Female religious within domestic settings

As tertiaries, unimpeded by the confines of formal claustration, these women had more options for negotiating alternative ways of leading a vocational life post-dissolution. Another option was to live out their religious vocation in the privacy and comparative safety of a domestic setting, sheltered within the confines of their family home. This is best exemplified in the case of the Prestons, Viscounts Gormanstowns, of County Meath who lent significant support to female religious in the late Tudor and early Stuart eras. Already wealthy and well established landowners in the north Leinster area by the early sixteenth century, the Prestons, like their neighbours the Barnewalls of Turvey, were major beneficiaries of the dissolution campaigns and ranked among the most influential Pale gentry families.⁵⁸ By the early seventeenth century, notwithstanding his long history of service and loyalty to the state, the Catholic sympathies of Christopher Preston (d.1599), fourth Viscount Gormanstown, were well known to contemporaries. As early as the 1590s, both he and his wife Catherine, maintained a household which had become the centre of religious life in the family's native parish of Stamullen, north County Meath.⁵⁹ A large proportion of the Preston's wealth was directed towards harbouring and maintaining Catholic clerics, a fact acknowledged by the polemicist Barnaby Rich. According to Rich, Jenico Preston, fifth Viscount Gormanstown and Christopher's son and heir, was one of six noblemen that 'doth

⁵⁵ Walsh, ed. 'Persecution of Catholics in Drogheda', 67–8.

⁵⁶ 'Answers of the Franciscans at Drogheda to Charges of the Vicar-General (1623)' in Jennings, ed. *Wadding Papers*, 34–5.

⁵⁷ Chronicle of Mother Mary Bonaventure Browne, MS, Galway Monastery of the Poor Clares, fol. 4v (hereafter 'Galway chronicle'). For a modern edition see Celsus O'Brien OFM ed. *Recollections of an Irish Poor Clare in the Seventeenth Century* (Galway: The Connacht Tribune, 1993). The surviving manuscript, whose watermark dates from the late seventeenth century, is a contemporary translation into English; the original perished during the Williamite wars in 1691: for an extended discussion see Coolahan, *Women, Writing & Language*, 78–101.

⁵⁸ Kingston, 'Catholic Families of the Pale', *Rep. Novum*, 2, part 2 (1960): 236–43.

⁵⁹ Printed in John Brady, 'Keeping the Faith at Gormanstown, 1569–1629' in Franciscan Fathers, Dún Mhuire eds. *Father Luke Wadding: Commemorative Volume* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1957), 407.

entertain priests and giveth support and countenance to popery in Ireland'.⁶⁰

As well as assisting priests, the Preston family also supported female members in their endeavours to lead a vowed or holy life. This is evident from Sir Christopher's will, dated 21 January 1599, in which he directed that if any of his daughters 'shall profess chastity and refuse to marry' she should receive an annual stipend of £15.⁶¹ Christopher and his wife, Catherine, had five daughters, of whom at least one, Eleanor, was, according to the 1615 regal visitation, a 'professed nun'. According to that report, Eleanor was living in the chaplain's house situated on her brother, Jenico's estate in Meath.⁶² The chaplain, Fr William Verdon, had served the Preston family in that capacity since the early 1590s. It appears that Eleanor continued to reside with Fr Verdon on the Gormanstown estate for a period of at least seven years as in 1622, according to another government report, both Eleanor and Verdon were still living there along with another secular priest, named James Delane.⁶³ The fact that Eleanor was able to continue living on the family estate, unimpeded by the government even after her discovery in 1615 is all the more remarkable given that during the first two decades of the seventeenth century episodes of religious coercion were especially pronounced in north Leinster, the precise location of the Gormanstown family home.⁶⁴ That Eleanor was resident in the private property of her family evidently shielded her from the censure of the government authorities. Clearly, while the authorities were willing to prosecute public acts of recusancy, such as non-attendance at divine service, by contrast they were far less inclined to interfere in affairs of private households, which, in early modern society, were viewed as the preserve of patriarchal control. In cases of subversive religious activities, state officials were thus generally very reluctant to intrude on familial homes.

The Prestons were by no means exceptional in sheltering religious women who were family members within their household. Eleanor Burke, daughter of the martyred Sir John Burke of Brittas (d. 1607) and his wife, Grace Thornton, was living in her mother's house as a Dominican tertiary in Limerick city during the early decades of the seventeenth century. She later travelled to Lisbon where she was among the first to profess at the newly established Irish Dominican convent of *Bom Sucesso* at Belém, the

⁶⁰ 'Barnaby Rich's 'Remembrances of the State of Ireland', 140–1.

⁶¹ Brady, 'Keeping the Faith at Gormanstown', 408.

⁶² The visitation report cited that, 'Wm Verdon, priest, [is] kept by the Viscount Gormanstown whose sister is a professed nun and the two lodge together'. The visitation included the dioceses of Meath and Ardagh: see Kingston, 'Catholic Families of the Pale', 2, part 2, 239.

⁶³ Robert J. Hunter, ed. 'Catholicism in Meath c.1622', *Collectanea Hibernica* (hereafter *Collect. Hib.*) 14 (1971): 7–12.

⁶⁴ Brian Mac Cuarta, *Catholic Revival in the North of Ireland, 1603–1641* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 168.

first continental foundation expressly for Irish female religious, where she died in 1648.⁶⁵ In 1630, according to the report of Lancelot Bulkeley (1568/9–1650), Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Mary Barnewall, ‘a nunn’, was sheltered by her brother, Robert Barnewall at his Shankill home, in south County Dublin. Indeed the Barnewall family residence was reportedly the centre of Catholic recusant activity for the local Shankill community. According to the archbishop’s report, Mass was secretly celebrated at Shankill Castle everyday by Tadhg O’Murrogh, a friar who was kept and maintained by the family.⁶⁶

These cases demonstrate that a number of influential families supported and protected their female members in their endeavours to live out religious vocations, albeit in a less formalised, structured and visible manner. However, these unregulated living arrangements for religious women were a cause of major concern for the Catholic Church authorities in Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe, as they were in direct contravention of Tridentine directives concerning enclosure, or ‘*clausura*’, for nuns. The 1563 Tridentine reform decrees had called for the enclosure of all female religious, including Third Order tertiaries. According to the decrees, female religious were not to interact with the world, where they could find themselves personally compromised; instead, they were to remain permanently within their cloisters after taking religious vows.⁶⁷ Reflecting the concern among members of the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland to promote and enforce these decrees, officials gathered at Kilkenny for the 1614 synod ruled that only with the consent of the ordinary (bishop or diocesan vicar) were priests to accept women’s religious vows. Reflecting the Catholic reformers’ concern to protect and uphold clerical celibacy and their intense unease at women sharing accommodation with priests to whom they were not related by family bonds, the decree reiterated the traditional teaching against such arrangements:

For reasons of prudence we decree that priests shall not have in their houses as guests at meals any women—even more those who have made a vow of

⁶⁵ *Bom Sucesso* Archive, Lisbon, BS 01/2, Part 3: ‘Permission granted by the Provincial of the Portuguese Dominicans, Frei João de Vasconcellos for the foundation of an Irish Dominican convent in Lisbon. Madrid, 15 June 1639’.

⁶⁶ Myles V. Ronan, ed. ‘Archbishop Bulkeley’s Visitation of Dublin, 1630’, *Arch. Hib.* 8 (1941): 82.

⁶⁷ For an extended discussion, see Walker, *Gender & Politics*, 43–54. See also R. Po-chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1998), chp. nine; Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 150; Susan E. Dinan, ‘Compliance and Defiance: The Daughters of Charity and the Council of Trent’, in Christopher Bellitto and Louis Hamilton, eds. *Reforming the Church before Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 199–217; Francesca Medioli, ‘An Unequal Law: The Enforcement of *clausura* before and after the Council of Trent’ in Christine Meek, ed. *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 136–47; Craig Harline, ‘Actives and Contemplatives: Female Religious of the Low Countries before and after Trent’, *The Catholic Historical Review* (hereafter *CHR*) 81, no. 4 (1995): 541–67.

virginity or chastity, or any others, since they might cause a scandal, and they are not to undertake the care of such women, even as a spiritual ministry, without further authorisation.⁶⁸

The reformers viewed the accommodation of women within informal domestic settings as a dangerous occasion of sin, however, their evident concern to limit and control its perpetuation demonstrates that this arrangement was not an uncommon feature of Catholic practice in Ireland by the early Stuart period.

Migration as a mechanism for survival

In the absence of conventional modes of formal cloistered living in Ireland, it is not surprising that for some women migration to the Continent in pursuit of religious vocations was a favourable option, an experience they shared with their English counterparts. While we have a good overall picture of the activities and locations of English women religious on the Continent during the early modern period—largely through the work of the pioneering 'Who Were the Nuns?' project—we lack an equivalent for Irish nuns.⁶⁹ Although their numbers, modes of migration and destinations are poorly documented, scattered evidence suggests that Irish women began to travel to the Continent in pursuit of religious vocations from about the 1580s or 1590s onwards.⁷⁰ John Howlin's reference to the hastened journey undertaken by Margery Barnewall to France in c.1580 funded by her family suggests the existence of support networks fostered by members of Dublin's recusant élite which aimed at enabling women to travel abroad to pursue cloistered convent living.⁷¹ This is underlined by the Irish Jesuit Henry Fitzsimon's reference in 1598 to a group of women living in Dublin who had 'consecrated themselves to God in a vow of perpetual virginity' and who then awaited 'an opportunity of sailing, to join a religious order on the Continent'.⁷² These networks

⁶⁸ 'Statuimus ut de caetero non habeant sacerdotes in suis domibus, aut mensis, ulla mulieres (etiam virginitatis aut castitatis voto adstrictas) aut ulla alias, de quibus suspicio esse posset: Nec hujusmodi foeminarum curam quamvis spiritualem suscipiant absque ulterior facultate': 'De votis mulierum' [On the vows of women], Dublin synod 1614. Text printed in Moran, *History of the Catholic Archbishops*, 455. For a discussion on Catholic synods in Ireland during the seventeenth century see Alison Forrester, *The Catholic Synods in Ireland, 1600–1690* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999).

⁶⁹ 'Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800', online, <http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/> (accessed 1 February 2015). Led by Dr Caroline Bowden (QMUL), this AHRC-funded project took place between 2008 and 2013. The project recovered a wealth of information about the nature of English female contemplative life in exile and has in turn led to a proliferation in scholarship on early modern English convents abroad, expanding considerably our knowledge of post-Reformation English Catholicism.

⁷⁰ Edmund Hogan, *Distinguished Irishmen of the Sixteenth Century* (New York and London: Burns & Oates, 1894), 209, 273; Howlin, 'Perbreve compendium'.

⁷¹ Hogan, *Distinguished Irishmen*, 209.

⁷² *Ibid.*

were sustained in the next century. In May 1607 a group of unnamed clerics in Ireland wrote to Fr Fitzsimon (c.1566–1643), who was then in exile in Spanish Flanders, urging him to safeguard those ‘virgins bound by the vow of chastity’ so that by his ‘care’ they might ‘have assistance in those parts’.⁷³ In this capacity, Fitzsimon played a similar role to that of his English contemporary and fellow Jesuit, John Gerard (1564–1637), who assisted English women travelling to the Continent during the early decades of the seventeenth century.⁷⁴

As with provisions for young men, families utilised existing Irish émigré networks to find suitable convents for their young female relatives. Thus, Irish clergymen in positions of prominence in Catholic colleges on the Continent were privy to such requests. In 1605, William Aves of Dublin wrote to Thomas Dease (c.1568–1651/2), later Bishop of Meath, who was then undertaking clerical studies at the Irish College in Paris, requesting places in a suitable convent for his sister, Thomasine and another woman named Besse Stanihurst. Later, Aves reported that two daughters of one Mr Stanihurst of Dublin had entered convents in Louvain, commenting that ‘we know not how, nor how cheap’.⁷⁵ While little is known about Thomasine Aves, Besse Stanihurst was undoubtedly a member of the prominent recusant Dublin Stanihurst family who were connected to the Barnewalls of Turvey through the marriage of Richard Stanihurst (1547–1618), the Catholic scholar, and Genet Barnewall (d. 1579), youngest daughter of Sir Christopher Barnewall, proprietor of the Augustinian convent of Grace Dieu in north County Dublin.⁷⁶ Interestingly, the Stanihurst family had themselves been beneficiaries of the dissolution campaigns and were granted the properties and manors of the Augustinian nunnery of Odder in County Meath following its suppression in 1539.⁷⁷

Another family who supported their female members in the pursuit of Continental religious vocations were the Nugents, Earls of Westmeath. Sir Richard Nugent (1583–1642), fifteenth Baron of Devlin and first Earl of Westmeath, and his wife Jane (d. c.1648), were well known recusants by the early seventeenth century: the couple harboured Catholic clerics at their home near Multyfarnham in County Westmeath, including the Jesuit priest Fr Nicholas Nugent and Bishop Thomas Dease.⁷⁸ Richard and Jane had two daughters, Bridget and Mary, for whom the family harnessed their connections

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁷⁴ Thomas M. McCoog, ‘Gerard, John (1564–1637)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*) (Oxford University Press, May 2014) online, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10556> (accessed 19 Jan. 2015).

⁷⁵ Mac Cuarta, *Catholic Revival*, 164.

⁷⁶ On Stanihurst see Lennon, *Richard Stanihurst*.

⁷⁷ White, ed. *Extents of Irish Monastic Possessions*, 262.

⁷⁸ Moran, *History of the Catholic Archbishops*, 397.

on the Continent in order to send them to convents abroad. In 1624, Richard requested that Fr Francis Lavalin Nugent (1569–1635), a close relative of the earl and founder of the Irish Capuchins, assist in transporting his two young daughters to the Continent in order that they might join a suitable convent.⁷⁹ In 1625, the young Nugent women left Ireland in the company of a cohort of Irish youths which included another woman, also a Nugent, named Elizabeth, and two or three young boys who were destined for the Irish College at Douai. In April 1625, the party arrived at Charleville in northern France where the Nugent girls were admitted to a convent in the town. One of the two, Mary, appears to have later joined an English Poor Clare community in Spanish Flanders where she was reportedly professed in 1629.⁸⁰ The fate of the second girl, Bridget, was less straightforward, however: it was reported that Fr Nugent later fell out of favour with the Earl of Westmeath after Bridget eloped with an Irishman of 'dubious' character whilst under the priest's care.⁸¹

The cases of Thomasine Aves, Besse Stanihurst and the Nugent women clearly indicate that from the later decades of the sixteenth century onwards, certain Catholic families were supporting their female offspring in the pursuit of a religious vocation on the Continent. However, the significant expense involved in travelling to Europe and payment of a dowry required for admission to continental convents, meant that religious training abroad was a viable option for only a small number of women from élite backgrounds. For others, the cost proved prohibitive. This was true in the case of two sisters, Ismay and Alison Barnewall, who were living in Drogheda in County Louth during the early 1600s. In 1608, they wrote to their brother, Patrick Barnewall of Bremore Castle, Balrothery in north County Dublin, who was then studying for the priesthood in Paris, requesting that he arrange suitable accommodation for them in a convent. The death of their father in February 1606 entitled them to their portions. However, the substantial dowry required—£120—on entering a convent meant that the young women were unable to make the journey abroad and were consequently forced to remain in Drogheda, where they lived vowed lives. Later, in the 1620s, after Patrick was appointed titular bishop of the Cistercian abbey of Mellifont, County Louth, he reportedly received his sisters Ismay and Alison into the Cistercian order, most likely as tertiaries.⁸²

⁷⁹ The Capuchins were a reformed branch of the Franciscans which emerged in the early sixteenth century: see F.X. Martin, *Friar Nugent: A Study of Francis Lavalin Nugent (1569–1635), Agent of the Counter-Reformation* (London: Methuen, 1962), 265.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Malachy Hartry, *Triumphalia Monasterii Sanctae Crucis*, ed. & trans. Denis Murphy (Dublin, 1891), 283–5.

The best-documented case of Irish women religious on the Continent are the group of Irish Poor Clares who professed at the English Poor Clare convent at Gravelines, near Calais, between 1620 and 1626. According to the Gravelines convent registers, at least five Irish women were professed there, the highest recorded concentration of Irish women in any continental convent during this period.⁸³ The first of these was Martha Cheveers (*in religion* Sister Martha Marianna), who was professed on 25 December 1620, at the age of twenty-one. According to the registers, her family originated from County Meath, her father being one of the ‘Chevers of Ballyhaly and Macetown’.⁸⁴ By September 1622, two more Irish girls had joined the English community at Gravelines. These two sisters, Ellen (*in religion* Sister Mary of St Joseph) and Cecily (*in religion* Sister Francis) Dillon, from another influential Old English family with close ties to the landed recusant élite of Westmeath, were professed at the ages of twenty-one and nineteen respectively. Their parents were Sir Theobald Dillon (d. 1625), first Viscount Dillon of Costello-Gallen, County Mayo and his wife, Eleanor (d. 1638), daughter of Sir Edward Tuite of Tuitestown, County Westmeath, both devout Catholics.⁸⁵ Theobald and Eleanor had a large family of eight sons and eleven daughters and the couple arranged Continental religious training for several of their children. Two of their sons, Edward (d. 1641) and George, entered St Anthony’s College, Louvain in 1616 and 1620 respectively and became Franciscans.⁸⁶ In 1625 two more girls of Irish origin, again with connections to the Old English gentry of the Pale, were professed at Gravelines. On 6 May 1625 Alice Nugent (*in religion* Sister Magdalen of St Clare), the ‘daughter of a prime gentleman of the Nugents’ made her profession while Mary Dowdall (*in religion* Sister Mary Peter), a Dublin native, was professed on the same day.⁸⁷ In 1627, this small group of Irish women religious established their own separate foundation at Nieuport in France where, under the guidance

⁸³ ‘Who Were the Nuns?’, online, <http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/> (accessed 1 February 2015).

⁸⁴ Her father was a relative of Edward Cheevers of Macetown County Meath, created Viscount Mount-Leinster by King James II in 1689: see W.M. Hunnybun, ed. ‘Registers of the English Poor Clares at Gravelines, including those who founded Filiations at Aire, Dunkirk and Rouen, 1608–1837’ in *Catholic Record Society*, Miscellanea ix, 14 (London: Catholic Record Society, 1914): 34–5.

⁸⁵ Hunnybun, ed. ‘Registers of the English Poor Clares’, 34–5. Their father, Theobald Dillon (d. 1624), originally from the barony of Kilkenny West, in Westmeath, enjoyed considerable prosperity as a political magnate and land holder in late sixteenth-century Connacht and by the early seventeenth century owned vast tracts of land in Roscommon and Mayo, in the west of Ireland. In 1622 Theobald purchased the title Viscount Dillon of Costello Gallen, an acquisition which consolidated his enhanced social status within Connacht society and among the wider Anglo-Irish élite: see John Lodge, *The Peerage of Ireland: Or, a Genealogical History of the present Nobility of that Kingdom. Rev., Enlarged, and Continued to the present time by Mervyn Archdall*, 7 vols (Dublin: James Moore, 1789), 4: 182.

⁸⁶ Fergal Grannell, *The Franciscans in Athlone* (Athlone: Franciscan Friary, 1978), 36–7.

⁸⁷ Hunnybun, ed. ‘Registers of the English Poor Clares’, 35.

of the abbess Ellen Dillon, they accepted two more Irish women into the fledgling community, Mary Power and Bridget Eustace.⁸⁸ While details of their backgrounds are unknown, their surnames indicate that they too were from prominent Old English families of the Pale.

The revival of conventual life in seventeenth-century Ireland

In 1629, against a backdrop of waning religious coercion, new-found Catholic confidence and greater stability for religious orders in Ireland, these Irish Poor Clares ended their continental exile with the intention of founding a convent Ireland. In this venture they were successful, establishing at Merchant's Quay in Dublin city the first convent of women religious in Ireland since the Henrician dissolutions of the 1530s and 1540s. This development signified, as Brian Mac Cuarta has contended, 'the normalisation of Irish Catholic life at this time'.⁸⁹ The foundation of the community was a clear indication of the confidence behind the Catholic revival and the relatively tolerant milieu in Ireland during this period. This departure can also be seen as part of the Catholic Church's institutional rehabilitation in Ireland which was growing apace following the arrival of figures such as David Rothe, Bishop of Ossory, in Ireland from the early 1620s onwards. The arrival of the nuns in Dublin was noted in the Provincial Chapter of the Irish Franciscans held at Limerick in August that year, and a decree was formulated whereby the female order was accepted and incorporated into the Irish Province. Fr Bonaventure Dillon, a nephew of the Dillon sisters, was appointed as confessor to the nuns while Cecily Dillon, the younger of the two Dillon siblings, was elected abbess of the nascent community.⁹⁰ While the arrival of the Poor Clares in Dublin appears to have been greeted optimistically by the Franciscans (as signified by their successful incorporation into the Irish Province), an air of pessimistic caution is discernible in the correspondence of Thomas Strange, guardian of the Franciscan order. Writing to Luke Wadding (1588–1657), the Irish Franciscan friar and historian then resident at Rome, from Waterford on 4 August 1629, Strange reported that: 'Our nuns that were at Newport, are arrived at Dublin, and propose to build a cloister there. What the times will say to it I know not'.⁹¹

Strange's pessimism was not unfounded. Just over one year after their arrival in the city, in the midst of a vigorous backlash on the part

⁸⁸ Hunnybun, ed. 'Registers of the English Poor Clares', 35.

⁸⁹ Mac Cuarta, *Catholic Revival*, 239.

⁹⁰ Concannon, *Poor Clares in Ireland*, 10. Fr Bonaventure Dillon was the son of Sir James Dillon and grandson of the first Viscount.

⁹¹ *Historical Manuscripts Commission Report on Franciscan Manuscripts Preserved at the Convent, Merchants Quay, Dublin* (Dublin: Printed for H.M. Stationary Office for J. Falconer, 1906), 14.

of the state authorities against Catholic practice, the Poor Clare convent was seized and its membership, which by then numbered sixteen, arrested.⁹² Following a hearing at Dublin Castle convened by Lord Justice Adam Loftus (1568?–1643), the nuns were ordered to immediately disband, depart from the city and to ‘put in good security never to assemble conventually together in the kingdom’ again.⁹³ Notwithstanding their suppression, however, within one year, by 1631 the Poor Clares had established a second convent named Bethlehem on the rural outskirts of Athlone, County Westmeath on land owned by the Dillon family.⁹⁴ Bernadette Cunningham has highlighted how the role played by Lady Eleanor Dillon—mother to the two Dillon sisters—was undoubtedly vital in ensuring the revival of the community.⁹⁵ As a widow with her own income at her disposal and as nominal head of the Dillon household, a landed family which exercised considerable authority in the wider Westmeath area, Lady Dillon exerted considerable influence over the religious orientation of her family. Her part in the establishment of the Poor Clare community at Bethlehem in the early 1630s is evidenced by the high number of new postulants admitted to the convent in the early years of its foundation, many of whom were related, either by blood or marriage, to the wealthy viscountess. No less than six Dillon women, all granddaughters of Lady Eleanor Dillon, were early postulants at the Bethlehem convent, including Eleanor, Cecily, Anne and Bridget Dillon⁹⁶, Eleanor Taaffe⁹⁷ and Clare Tuite.⁹⁸ Several members of the strongly recusant Browne family from Galway, with whom the Dillons were connected through marriage, also joined the Bethlehem community. They included Catherine Browne (d. 1668), daughter of James Browne of Galway, the signed record of whose pre-profession examination dated 29 January 1632 survives and is housed at the Poor Clare convent in Galway.⁹⁹ A year later, in 1633, two more Browne women, Catherine and Mary Browne, daughters of

⁹² Alexander B. Grosart, ed. *The Lismore Papers: Autobiographical Notes, Remembrances and Diaries of Sir Richard Boyle*, 5 vols (Privately printed, 1886), 1st ser., 3:160.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ According to O’Brien the convent was named Bethlehem after the fifteenth century convent of the same name founded at Ghent by Saint Colette in 1442: see Celsus O’Brien OFM, *The Poor Clares Galway, 1642–1992* (Galway: Poor Clare Sisters, 1992), 11.

⁹⁵ Cunningham, ‘Bethlehem’: The Dillons & The Poor Clare Convent’, 7.

⁹⁶ Eleanor, Cecily, Anne and Bridget were daughters of Thomas Fitzgerald of Creevagh or Newcastle and his wife Elizabeth, third daughter of Theobald and Eleanor Dillon: see K.W. Nicholls, ‘The Descendants of Oliver Fitzgerald of Belagh’ in *Ir. Geneal.* 4, no. 1 (1968): 5.

⁹⁷ Lodge, *The Peerage of Ireland*, 4: 292–6.

⁹⁸ Clare Tuite later joined the English Poor Clares at Rouen where she arrived in May 1664. For an account of her activities on the Continent see Coolahan, ‘Archipelagic Identities in Europe’, 215.

⁹⁹ Bronagh Ann McShane, ‘The Pre-Profession Examination Record of Sister Catherine Browne (in religion Sister Catherine of St Francis), Poor Clare Convent, Bethlehem, County Westmeath, 1632’, *Arch. Hib.* (forthcoming, 2017).

Galway Alderman Andrew Browne, a well-known recusant, also entered the Bethlehem convent.¹⁰⁰ Mary Browne was later elected abbess of the community and between 1668 and 1671 she composed a chronicle history of the Irish Poor Clare order, the principal source of evidence for the Irish order's activities during the seventeenth century.¹⁰¹

According to Browne's chronicle account, the period 1631–41 represented for the Poor Clare sisters in Ireland a 'golden age'. By the late 1630s the Bethlehem community had expanded to number about sixty members.¹⁰² The order's expansion, fuelled largely by élite patronage derived from close family ties, also formed part of a wider development of communities of various religious orders across the Pale. Benefiting from a relaxation of the government's coercion measures from about 1632 onwards, the period witnessed a profound expansion of the Catholic infrastructure, particularly in the northern Pale, so that by 1641 the area covering Leinster had one of the highest concentrations of religious houses in the kingdom. Thus, male orders such as the Dominicans, Capuchins and Franciscans established or re-established houses in major towns and cities such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Slane, Mullingar and Drogheda.¹⁰³ The Poor Clares too formed part of this rapidly expanding Catholic infrastructure and by about 1640, owing to increasing numbers of postulants, a new convent was established at Drogheda. Led by Sister Alice Nugent, an original Gravelines member, seventeen nuns relocated from Bethlehem to the north Leinster town, among them two daughters of General Thomas Preston (d. 1655), brother of Jenico Preston, fifth Viscount Gormanstown.¹⁰⁴ The Drogheda convent was apparently well-endowed as a spacious building was under construction; in June 1641 the Irish council reported that at Drogheda there were 'many hundreds of Jesuits, friars and priests' in the town and among them, 'a howse for a Nunnerie of late erected, with great charge, which is soe spacious as it conteines fowrscore windoes of a side, and is not yet thoroughly finished, but great expectation there is of it'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ In 1632 Andrew Brown was appointed sheriff of Galway but refused to take his office: see Marie-Louise Coolahan, 'Browne, Mary (d. in or before 1694)', *ODNB*, online, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/105827> (accessed 28 Jan. 2015).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² 'Galway chronicle', fol. 3v.

¹⁰³ Estimates suggest that around 300 members of religious orders (largely Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits) were active in Ireland by 1623. By 1641, that number had risen to about 1,600 friars (around 1,000 Franciscans and 400 Dominicans as well as other smaller orders such as the Capuchins): see Mac Cuarta, *Catholic Revival*, 128.

¹⁰⁴ 'Galway chronicle', fol. 3r; John T. Gilbert ed., *A Contemporary History of Affairs in Ireland, from 1641 to 1652*, 3 vols (Dublin: Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1879), 2:146–7.

¹⁰⁵ The National Archives, Kew, S.P. 63/259/44.

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the gendered experience of the Henrician suppression campaigns by examining the various mechanisms and strategies deployed by women wishing to live out religious vocations in post-dissolution Ireland. As has been highlighted, links between women religious and members of the élite aristocracy and gentry were vital to the survival and perpetuation of their way of life in the aftermath of the dissolutions. The survival of the Grace Dieu community at Portrane in north County Dublin until 1577 exemplifies how one group of women effectively harnessed close links with influential members of the recusant élite to continue living conventually for several decades after the closure of their house. Maintenance of traditional modes of conventual living was just one mechanism by which women continued to lead a vowed or holy life in the decades post-dissolution. Other options were to live one's religious vocation within a domestic setting, sheltered within the confines of the family home, to join religious communities as tertiaries or to travel abroad in pursuit of formal religious vocations on the Continent. All of these made possible the survival of the female vocational lifestyle in the interlude between the late medieval period and the Catholic renewal of the early seventeenth century. The return to Dublin in 1629 of seven Poor Clare nuns was significant heralding as it did the revival of formal monastic life on the island for women in line with the doctrines of the Council of Trent. From this first house at Dublin sprang further establishments so that on the eve of the 1641 uprising, a lively and active network of Poor Clare convents traversed a wide geographical area, from Drogheda in the north to Athlone in the west. These convents were important standard-bearers of continuity with the 'old' post-dissolution monastic order that many Old English recusant families, such as the Barnewalls, Prestons and Nugents, were instrumental in preserving. As Margaret Mac Curtain has contended, the Irish Poor Clares represented 'a substantial presence among the forces of recusancy' in early to mid-seventeenth century Ireland.¹⁰⁶ As with male religious communities, however, the outbreak of sectarian violence in autumn 1641, which signalled the beginning of a lengthy period of intense and protracted warfare, would seriously shake the foundations of that presence on the island.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Mac Curtain, 'Women, Education and Learning in Early Modern Ireland', in *eadem* & O'Dowd, eds. *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 169.