

It was this spirit which would drive the future apostolate of her religious congregation, which expanded steadily between 1807 and 1830, with the founding of twenty-two houses in fourteen counties throughout Ireland. The success of foundation houses, convents and schools depended on the entrepreneurial skills of each new community of nuns, and how they utilised money garnered from charity sermons, donations, bequests and collections. Funding also stemmed from dowries brought by individuals entering the order (typically between £500 and £600 between 1770 and 1870), as well as generous donations from wealthy families, lay philanthropists and local clergy.

The chapters which trace the expansion of Presentation schools to countries where Irish emigrants were in need of Catholic education chart tales of personal resilience in the face of adversity. Included is the arduous task which faced the four Galway nuns who established the first overseas foundation in Newfoundland in 1833, and how, despite having ‘to slice the milk’, they managed to ‘bear the cold well and were never in better health’ (p. 65). In an era of open hostility towards Catholics in England, ‘it took courage’ (p. 113) for Presentation Sisters to found the first Irish order in Manchester in 1836, and despite anti-Catholic prejudice, ‘the pioneering sisters built a reputation as skilled and capable teachers’ (p. 175).

During the Famine, the Presentation Sisters’ apostolate extended beyond the classroom, as they fed and clothed who they could, and the chapter on second-level education provides detailed information on how the nuns adapted to the numerous changes to education in Ireland since the formation of the national education system in 1831. Utilising convent annals, the authors examine the order during the twentieth century, exploring how communities endured through the First and Second World Wars, and how they challenged the patriarchal propensities of individual members of the church hierarchy in Ireland, to establish second-level education for working-class girls (p. 142).

Whilst Nagle’s mission to provide education for the poor links each chapter, ultimately her legacy must be read through the perseverance and endurance of the thousands of Presentation Sisters who followed in her wake. Although deferential to the ecclesiology of the Catholic Church, they often acted autonomously, inspired by confidence in their Catholic identity and the desire to fulfil the directives of the original charism set out by Nagle. Consequently, imbued with Catholic devotionism, the Presentation Sisters remained leading global providers of Catholic education into the twentieth century. One minor caveat, is that only one chapter provides a personal insight into the life of Nagle, but as the authors explain, other than a few hand-written letters, there is ‘very slender evidence of her life’ (p. 5). Despite this, they have produced a meticulously researched book, with extensive end-notes and bibliography. Published to coincide with the tercentenary of Nagle’s birth, it will attract those interested in the history of education, of women religious and the Catholic church, and is a welcome contribution to studies by historians such as Rosemary Raughter, Margaret MacCurtain, Yvonne McKenna, Jacinta Prunty and Susan O’Brien, all of whom have helped to bring the lives of formidable women religious and their communities into the public realm.

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MARY ANN MCCrackEN, 1770–1866: A BELFAST PANORAMA. By Mary McNeill. Revised edition. Pp 314. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. 2019. €22.95.

In the last few years, an increasing focus on both local and women’s history has been reflected in a revival of interest in the life of Mary Ann McCracken. Previously acknowledged as a figure of some significance because of her engagement with the United Irishmen and her close relationship with leading participants in the movement, particularly her brother, Henry Joy, and Thomas Russell, she has now gained recognition in her own right.

Any exploration of the ninety-six years between her birth in 1770 and her death in 1866 would reveal dramatic changes – in social, economic and political life – throughout Europe and beyond, in Britain, Ireland, and indeed in Belfast itself. The life of Mary Ann, however, offers a unique insight into the transformations taking place. Family connections placed her at the very heart of the ideological maelstrom that challenged the status quo, while her intelligence, strength of character and compassion underlined her determined endeavours to put theory into practice.

The first three chapters provide the wider political, social, cultural and economic context through the history of a family with considerable investment in many aspects of life in the growing town. The influences with which she was surrounded as a child and adolescent, her unusual education and immersion in both local and international political discourse combined to inspire confidence in the validity of McCracken's engagement with the reforming spirit on the times.

Events in revolutionary France stimulated opportunities and heightened expectations that a similar social and political revolution could break the chains of oppression for Catholics, Dissenters and the poor of Ireland. The author captures the atmosphere of excitement as the United Irishmen and their compatriots excitedly debated their aspirations and planned their campaign while trying to evade capture. Mary Ann's letters to her brother throughout periods of imprisonment reveal her knowledge of, and indeed, participation in, his plans for rebellion. Although there appears to have been a separate society of United Irishwomen, she was not herself a member and indeed was strongly opposed to such gender segregation:

as there can be no other reason for having them separate but keeping the women in the dark and certainly it is equally ungenerous and uncandid to make tools of them without confiding in them. I wish to know if they have any rational ideas of liberty and equality for themselves or whether they are contented with their present abject and dependent situation (p. 113).

There are strong echoes of Mary Wollstonecraft here, in both tone and content, and the influence of contemporary radical philosophers on her own political development is clear. The rebellion and its aftermath, as captured by the letters between brother and sister are detailed and intimate and enhanced by the sympathetic, if often romantically imaginative, skills of the author as she works to bring the stirring scenes to life.

However, the dramatic events of 1798 mark only the beginning of a long life devoted to a range of causes as McCracken put her ethical and moral views to practical use. In the early 1800s, she and her sister Margaret opened a muslin manufacturing business in Belfast where, through trading fluctuations, concern for the welfare of her workers was a major priority. Links to Belfast Poor House were strengthened by her involvement with the Ladies' Committee, battling male prejudice to open a school for infant children where she introduced innovative educational practices. She was also committed to the destitute sick, victims of famine, climbing boys, workhouse residents and students at the ladies' industrial school. Her compassion for the oppressed and exploited led to vigorous and angry opposition to the 'horrid traffic' of slavery, in both youth and old age.

Focused on one ideal – to ease the suffering of the poor – many of McCracken's charitable and philanthropic activities were typical of middle-class female life in the nineteenth century. However, her benevolence was marked by strong and innovative leadership, while the commitment and courage she demonstrated as she smuggled men around the country is quite remarkable. This anniversary publication is part of a wider project to popularise the life of an extraordinary woman; it features a new introduction by Marianne Elliott and, importantly, introduces fresh archival material. The author is herself cast in the mould of her subject and her empathy precludes critical analysis; nonetheless, the Mary Ann McCracken Foundation is to be congratulated on raising the profile of a life worthy of its place in the history of those tumultuous times.