Elizabeth SMYTH

Notes for Further Research: Through An Irish Lens

VIEWING THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN WOMEN RELIGIOUS

You know [Sister] Alphonsus, people insist

that we were ignorant but we were forbidden education. They say we are negligent and dirty but we were not allowed wages for our work, wages we could have spent on cleanliness and nice homes. We are accused of brawling and violence but a people who experience violence often use the same treatment on others. No Nation is anxious to be ignorant, dirty or violent, Sister. They are made that way by people who condemn them for it.

With these words the historical character, Jane McCarthy, in religion Sister Jane Francis, the first woman to join the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto explains the plight of the Irish in Toronto to one of her sisters in religion. These lines are taken from a 1995 historical novel Out of the Mists of Time: Clonakilty to Cabbagetown penned by Sister Catharine McCarthy, a member of the same religious community. The novel is a fictionalized account of Jane's brief life and career as a woman religious in nineteenth century Toronto. Jane was born in Clonakilty, County Cork. In 1848, at age 14, Jane immigrated with her seven orphaned siblings to Canada West. She entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1851 and for the next thirteen years served in the community's orphanages and schools as teacher, health care worker and religious administrator. She died in 1864, victim of tuberculosis, a disease that wrecked havoc among her countrymen and women in both her native and adopted land.

Jane McCarthy represents a cohort of Irish migrants who contributed significantly to the building of Canadian Catholic institutions of education, social service and health care. In the field of education, the direct influence of Irish women religious began with the arrival of four Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in St. John's Newfoundland on 21 September 1853. The Presentations were later followed by other Irish communities — including the Sisters of Mercy (1842 - Newfoundland) and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (the Loretto Sisters – 1847-Toronto) — who established schools, hospitals and orphanages across Canada.

Many other religious congregations, such as the Sisters of St. Joseph (who were founded in LePuy, France), attracted Irish-born women like Jane McCarthy. In fact, during the first decade of its existence, 65% of the women entering the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto were Irish born. My study of the first sixty years of the community's existence shows that the Irish influence was exceptionally strong. Archival sources such as the community annals and obituary notices demonstrate that many of Canadian born women had Irish ancestry. The Irish roots of the community were also very evident in the Sisters' public and community celebrations. Allegorical plays written by members of the community praising Erin as the Isle of Saints and Scholars, community celebrations of St. Patrick's Day and a continuous parade of leading figures in the Irish cultural and political community attests to these ties. Between 1851 and 1920, women who joined the order came from those areas of Ontario that supported large Irish settlements including Toronto (18%), Simcoe, (17.65%), Stormont (9.6%) and the Niagara peninsula counties (Lincoln, Welland, Wentworth, Halton and Haldimand:13.5%).

The Sisters of St. Joseph are but one of the 147 congregations of women religious operating in Canada today.

The presence and influence of Irish women religious in these congregations must be more fully explored. Studies must be undertaken at both congregational and individual levels. As Jane McCarthy's biographer explained,

The monuments of [the Sisters of St. Joseph] are institutions great and small... The monuments of the individual women of the community are tiny concrete plaques, sunk into the grounds of old...cemeteries. I suspect that here were the more magnificent monuments, here where lie the bones of the real heroes. I wanted to breathe life into those bones, those dry bones, so that we at the end of the twentieth century might get a glimpse of the heroic acts, the achievements and the dreams, all unrecorded, that lay shrouded in the mists of time and forgetfulness for more than a century. It is a story of the Irish immigrant and all immigrants...of the early Sisters and all sisters.

Researching Irish-Canadian Women Religious: The Influence of Irish Scholars

Women religious is the scholarly label used to encompass vowed women in the Christian tradition who live their lives as nuns and sisters. Although nuns and sisters are used as synonymous terms, even among nuns and sisters themselves,
they have distinct meanings in Canon Law. Nuns and sisters take different types of vows. They live in different settings, with nuns leading their prayer lives in perpetual enclosure while sisters engage in the active apostolate, that is, leading lives of prayer while engaged in fields as diverse as education, social service, health care, parish missions and retreat work. Most of the women religious seen by the public today are sisters and all of the women who are participating in this study are sisters.

With the Second Vatican Council, and the call for women religious to explore their roots, congregations of women religious, both themselves and collaboratively with secular historians, began to analyze their historic and historical roles. For many congregations, this represents a departure from previous practices, as their historical identity of silent serving led some communities to view the vow of obedience as embodying humility and neither campaigned for public recognition for their achievements nor systematically studied their past. The past four decades has witnessed a rise in the scholarly investigation of congregations of women religious, with the work of many Irish scholars contributing to the growing field. While many studies might be referenced, the influence of the following authors has been significant in framing this study of Canadian women religious.

 Margaret MacCurtain’s substantial body of work presents many important scholarly insights into the complexity and diversity of Irish women religious. In her introduction to the “Religion, Science, Theology and Ethics” section of The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, MacCurtain writes that “Women seemed to be present everywhere in the churches in the nineteenth century except on the altars” – an observation with resonance to contemporary women religious who continue to struggle to negotiate their identities within the religious patriarchy that is the Roman Catholic Church. Her essays, especially “Late in the Field: Catholic Sisters in Twentieth Century Ireland and the New Religious History” and “Godly Burden: The Catholic Sisterhoods in Twentieth-Century Ireland” richly inform the scholarly debate on the nature and role of women religious on the larger canvas of social history. MacCurtain’s 1994 collaboration with American historian SueEllen Hoy is an important contribution to the history of migrant women religious. From Dublin to New Orleans: The Journey of Alice and Nora presents and analyzes the ship board diaries of two Irish Dominican novices who journeyed from a Cabra convent to join a community in New Orleans. MacCurtain and Hoy’s analysis focuses on the importance of context when exploring the lives and careers of religious.

Recent biographers by and of Irish women religious have furthered this scholarly sector. Mary C. Sullivan’s biography of Catherine McAuley places her life and works in a larger historical context. Phil Kilroy’s Madeleine Sophie Barat: A Life demonstrates how one can be both respectful of the subject – in this case the founder of the Religious of the Sacred Heart – and be scholarly-critical. Drawing extensively on the archival holdings in Italy and France, supplemented by provincial archives of the Society, and the 14,000 letters penned by Barat herself, Kilroy creates a work that is painstakingly documented and very readable, of a woman founder living in an age of “a dark, heavy religion [that] gave clergy great power over the inner lives of men and women.” This volume provides important insights into the governance and operations of a congregation as it developed into a multi-lingual, multi ethnic organization.

Caitriona Clear’s studies of the rise of Irish convents in the nineteenth century sets a context against which to situate comparative studies. She points out how, by using a variety of public and private sources, greater insights can be gained into the growth and operations of these unique types of women’s organizations that were so visible yet so frequently overlooked by social historians. Yvonne McKenna’s methodological and comparative studies assist in raising overarching questions. In her 2003 article “Sisterhood? Exploring Power relations in the Collection of Oral History” problematizes the role of the researcher in the process of oral history – especially when ethno cultural identity links the researcher to the subjects. This study illuminates the variety of ways in which ethnicity both enhances and inhibited the development of relationships among subjects. As McKenna notes, “women who entered the English congregation found that their Irishness worked against them.”

The work of these scholars has thus richly informed both the design and the development of the study reported below.

This Course of Research
At present, I am engaged in a three phase course of research that aims to document and analyse Canadian women religious and their work in elementary, secondary and higher education. I am employing the tools of oral history, document analysis and analysis of material culture to examine my sources. Phase 1 consisted of data collection and oral histories across seven congregations. Phase 2 was an intensive oral history collection in one congregation. Phase 3, the comprehensive cross-congregation oral history and document analysis, including analysis of shifts in congregational mission and transference of institutions into lay hands, is just beginning.

Phase 1 began with intensive reading and researching in the social, theological and historical evolution of communities of Canadian women religious. Seven communities were selected for study. The communities are of French, Irish and Canadian origin. They are representative of the variety of communities of sisters that have work in Canada. I made contact with the leadership teams with two requests: to gain access to the archival records and to have their support to invite congregational members to individually participate in oral history component. Interview protocols were developed in consultation with the communities of women religious and informed by the work of feminist scholars and scholars of oral history such as Kathleen Casey, Susan Geiger and Carol Rogers. The interviews conducted were open-ended explorations under the general headings of personal background, decisions to enter religious life, career as a teaching sister, impact of Vatican II, impact of changing government policies on education, health care and public service and an assessment of their personal contributions and that of their communities.

In Phase 1, over 150 women religious were interviewed. The interviews have ranged from 2 hour to 4 hours (and a few continued informally over several days). With a few exceptions, the interviews were done face to face onsite at the respective
motherhouses. The exceptions were done through individual audio or video conferencing. During my time onsite, community archival sources were systematically reviewed, categorized and copied. From Books of Reception and Quinquinneal Reports, statistical data were compiled on the changing demographics of the community. Qualitative data were drawn from necrologies – the collection of obituaries - and the community annals, the reports that documented daily activities. In Phase 1, the sister subjects were given anonymity.

Phase 2 overlapped with Phase 1 and was part of a community historical celebration. For the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, the community leadership decided that it would undertake an oral history project in which each member would be invited to participate. The resulting volume, co-edited by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto's archivist Linda Wicks and myself, *Wisdom Raises Her Voice: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto Celebrate 150 Years*, reflects not only how history as a field has changed but also indicates the change in religious and community life.

Over 150 sisters narrated their memories and reflected on their lives and work. Each sister who agreed to participate created an individual audiotaped interview. In a session of 30 to 120 minutes duration, the sister described her family background, her education, her call to religious life, her time in formation, and the missions in which she served and the changes she had observed over time. The interview concluded with the sister's commentary on the charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph and a reflection on the future of religious life. These oral histories cover almost a century of experience as the sisters ranged in age from their forties to their nineties and create a mosaic of the lives and memories of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto.

The *Wisdom* volume supplies, in their own voices, the life histories and experiences of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto. The recollections provide a rich commentary and a finely grained portrait of the complex and compelling world of this community. The volume's chapters were constructed around the eight foci of the interview and thus, the oral history is divided into eight chapters. Each begins with a Maxim taken from the writings of the Jesuit founder of the community, J.P.Medaille, and serves as a context for the comments of the sisters which follow. Each of the sisters is named in this phase of the study.

Phase 3 of the study, the analysis of the oral histories across congregations and the documentation of the shift in congregational mission that mark the end of the institutional phase of religious life and enterprises, is just beginning.

**Ongoing Research**

The first two phases of this course of research contain many examples of native born, first and second generation Irish women whose ethnic identities seem to have been an important element in their religious and professional lives. As Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, and Terrence Fay have demonstrated, ethnic identity plays a key role in the history of Canadian Catholicism. How this is evident on the congregational level is emerging in this present study. The impact of ethnicity looms large as a cause of both congregational consolidation and separation. The members of the Order of St. Ursula (the Ursulines) demonstrate the former. Two Ontario branches of the Ursulines, one from a French foundation and one from an Irish foundation, came together in the mid years of the twentieth century. Interestingly, ethnic identity did not prevent an Irish Ursuline from becoming the general superior. Yet, in the case of the Grey Sisters of Montreal, national, linguistic and ethnic identities contributed to the emergence of self-governing branches. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two dominantly Irish and English speaking independent foundations emerged: the Grey Sisters of the Sacred Heart and the Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

There are also instances of congregations separating and later, coming back together. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary was established in Toronto in 1847 from Rathfarnham, Ireland. It was created as the North American Generalate in 1881 and reunited with the Irish Branch in 2003. How the members of the North American Branch will integrate with their Irish branch will reveal much about religious identity in an age of cultural pluralism. The study of the Canadian Loretto Sisters also provides an opportunity to trace how Irish congregational practices and customs transfer across political borders. What similarities and differences exist across these institutions of higher education for women that were established around the world? To what extent were their Irish origins celebrated? Promoted? Integrated into the local culture?

Throughout the analytical phase of the study, there is evidence that congregational demographics reflected changing ethno cultural immigration patterns with not always harmonious results. There is some evidence that McKenna's findings are replicated in some congregations, for ethnic origins do seem to have impacted ones chances for leadership. Few women of Irish background rose up the ranks in congregations that were deeply rooted in French Canada (the Sisters of St. Anne being one example). Significantly, the expansion of missionary activity in the foreign mission field brought some congregations into political movements and caused them to reflect on the impact of diversifying their congregations ethnically, linguistically and racially.

Since many of the congregations studied have within their history strong links to Ireland either through their founding members or through contemporary links, or are involved in initiatives that are international in scope, this course of research presents significant opportunities for research links between Canada and Ireland.

In both Ireland and Canada, women religious are at the end of one phase of their history and the beginning of another. They have left behind their large institutions but have retained their missions of operating both on the margins and in the centre of secular and religious societies in ways that continue to transform not only of their own institutions, enterprises and organizations but also contemporary society itself. Studies such as this one will capture the richness of this transitional phase – and will continue to pose questions that future generations of scholars may pursue.
Notes:

1 C. McCarthy, CSJ, Out of the Mists of Time: Clonakilty to Cahargois (Toronto: Tru-Colour Lithography, 1995), 145.


3 Ibid., 82.


5 McCarthy, v. vii.


9 M. C. Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).


17 See McKenna “Forgotten Migrants.”