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The Convent as Cultural Conduit: Irish Matronage in Early Modern Spain

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Irish catholic women religious who migrated to Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries established a strong tradition of schools, hospitals and charitable institutions. Education and learning were important to Irish communities, and were recognised within Spain. Irish nuns and their convents were not part of an enclosed tradition and outreach work was a central aim. Sponsorship links between women were part of a collective plan, and cultural matronage by and for women appears to have been very effective. Censorship by the Inquisition and tridentine orthodoxy was contested by women's religious houses which resisted censorship of book collections and art works. This article explores the links of cultural matronage between Irish women and their resistance to patriarchal efforts to control them.

It is often assumed that due to enclosure catholic convent spaces were private, and that enclosure rules after 1563 drew a deep division between those in holy orders and the society they had withdrawn from. This was not the case in relation to Irish convents established throughout the Iberian peninsular from 1590 onwards. The women who founded, sponsored and lived in these convents were not part of an enclosed tradition. Irish female learning was renowned, and continued to be prized within Spain, a country first-generation, Irish migrants had entered for religious and political reasons. These women, and their surrounding networks and communities developed trading, medical and educational networks. Female sponsors, or matrons, were central to the development and sustained role of female education and medical orders. Matronage of these institutions and spaces has remained an area overlooked by scholars who have tended to focus upon Irish incomers roles' in the clergy and the Spanish military.¹

¹ Recent studies include the Irish in Europe project's three volume edited collections,

A lengthy historical relationship existed between Spain and Ireland stretching back to the middle ages, with well developed trade links between the south of Ireland and its ports, and north west Spain. Irish settlement in La Coruña was well established in the sixteenth century, and included the founding of an Irish college in Santiago de Compostela.² From 1608 onwards Irish people were granted equal citizenship if they had lived in Spain for ten years and had made a contribution to their communities.³ Irish convents were established from 1590 onwards in La Coruña, Santiago, Madrid, Valladolid, Salamanca, Seville and Cadiz, as well as Lisbon. None of these were enclosed. They all focused upon outreach work as part of their active missions. The majority were Dominican or Benedictine, and were educational or medical orders.

Post tridentine reforms emphasised enclosure, the privatising of spaces within the convent walls. Celibacy and chastity were re-emphasised. Charitable industry was also re-emphasised, and this was something that Irish nuns in particular developed outside the convent, as well as inside. When targeted by regional archbishops to place grills on windows and refrain from outside visits, teaching, or other active mission activities, the Abbesses of the Irish convents would reply by citing the rule of St. Benedict, chapter 64, which obliged the nuns to work and convert.⁴ Educational reforms originally introduced by Jesuits into their schools and colleges after 1563 ironically fostered a degree of autonomy. Female religious

Thomas O'Connor (ed.) *The Irish in Europe, 1580-1815* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001); Thomas O'Connor & Mary Ann Lyons (eds.) *Irish Migrants after Kinsale, 1602-1820* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); Thomas O'Connor & Mary Ann Lyons (eds.) *Irish communities in early-modern Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).

2 See Patricia O'Connell, *The Irish College at Santiago de Compostela, 1605-1769* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007).

3 Philip III granted full Irish citizenship to loyal catholic émigrés from 1608 onwards. This was prompted by close ties which had existed during the previous century, and the Spanish view that the Irish were loyal catholics who had fought a war with England to preserve catholicism.

4 The rule of St. Benedict established that the head of the house was the most important person in the monastery or nunnery. This meant that in practice the Abbess or the Prioress had similar rights and privileges as abbots, rendering them powerful women who could, if necessary, communicate directly with the papacy.

adopted some of those ideas, broadening the constituency of their scholars. They were active agents in choosing to remain in outreach work, including pastoral, educational and medical duties.

Early Irish migrants were often elite and wealthy. This first wave of migrants was religious and political, not economic. Their sense of elite status was constantly referred to by themselves, and by their Spanish sponsors. The Condé de Caracena, governor of Galicia, advised Philip II that the Irish were ‘the right kind of catholics’.⁵ They had fought a war for Catholicism. Wealthy Irish female migrants were part of septs, that is, a large group claiming to belong to a common named ancestor. This could be a sept chief of the O’Neill’s or the O’Donnell’s, a highly regarded sept. Irish wives did not have to name their children’s father until they were on their deathbed, and notions of legitimacy, primogeniture and monogamy were not part of the old Irish sept culture. The power of women to inherit, and to disseminate wealth was considerably greater in Ireland than in most other European states. This sense of elite status meant that Irish women and men had themselves re-ennobled when they settled in Spain.⁶ Sources also show that there was one Irish female memorial (will) for every ten men’s memorial,⁷ a very high percentage for the early modern period.

Matronage was vital in oiling the processes of assimilation. Monarchy and government could not have any hope of control in a composite kingdom without keeping the regional elites happily involved in their government. For first generation Irish migrants’ assimilation was the apogee of their expectations and plans. What was important was the contribution which Irish (mainly elite) incomers could provide in terms of wealth, education and culture to the, at times, economically unstable domestic Spanish economy with its huge skill gaps in terms of the lack of educated linguists,

5 Estado Legajo 225, Archivo General de Simancas (hereafter AGS).

6 Manuscripts held in the Archivo General de Simancas relating to Irish communities are full of examples of elite Irish re-ennoblement.

7 The AGS holds manuscripts which detail Irish women and men’s memorials.

as well as merchants. The Spanish monarchy and governments made clear their continued support of Irish incomers to maintain co-operation and reward loyal service. Matronage, as well as patronage needs to be seen in terms of what could be received, and what could be distributed. The disposal of matronage and patronage included the granting of titles, lands and offices to loyal Irish, and a reciprocal relationship based on Irish sponsorship of schools, colleges, churches and hospitals within the peninsular. When mapped against the foundations established by men in the same period, boys' schools, colleges and hospitals for men, we can see that almost as many institutions and projects were established by women, with the exception of universities. However, ironically, Irish female religious were not, in their schools and colleges, subject to the level of authoritarian control and inspection of their buildings, teaching methods and book collections.

Censorship of vernacular texts and materials initiated within the Inquisition did not impact upon female spaces in the way it impacted upon male spaces.⁸ Inspectors and inquisition functionaries could enter monasteries and boys' schools, but could not search convents.⁹ Any male outsider who attempted to gain entry to an Irish convent was informed swiftly that he was not allowed in any of the private rooms. This meant that convent buildings were uniquely feminised spaces, and surviving books and manuscript collections show among other banned literature, a variety of humanist texts including Pliny, Plutarch, A History of the Jews, Latin and Greek grammars (Greek for girls was banned on the basis that it could cause their brains to explode), natural history collections, animal studies, shells and books on poisons as well as other pharmacological works. Convent buildings show that during the sixteenth and the seventeenth

8 For a useful discussion of Inquisition censorship of texts and prohibited books see John Edwards, *Torquemada and the Inquisitors* (Gloucester: Tempus Press, 2005) especially chapter 6.

9 Although the Dominican order was founded in order to drive the Inquisition forward it appears that Dominican sisters and their matrons in Spain played no part in this, and actively subverted it in their own houses.

centuries the spaces for *bibliotecas* and scriptoriums increased to house collections and work spaces, including the use of desks. The Dominican convents in Valladolid, La Coruña and Lisbon had large library buildings, and extensive library collections .¹⁰

Irish convents operated matronage through a number of intersecting networks including business and finance, land sales and mortgages, local people as employees, education of girls who were poor as well as wealthy, medicine, and the dissemination of texts, art and architecture. It was not unusual to find both Irish and Spanish women leaving land and property to women friends and relatives. Schools and hospitals were gifted in many women's wills. Dominican and Benedictine orders were static in Spain, and became landowners.

Female religious included a number of Irish women who purposely sponsored religious orders and their missions. Matronage of these projects was deliberate and sustained. A focus upon some micro-historical case studies illustrates this self-conscious sponsorship by women of women. Pride in ancestry was an important feature in both Irish and Spanish senses of belonging. Sept or clan networks stretched across the Iberian peninsula.¹¹ James Casey notes that Spanish clan networks of sponsorship and honour were central to reward and promotion within Spanish society.¹² This reward system also applied to Irish incomers. Tombs and burial chambers were costly. Irish women, and in particular, Doña Catalina Warnes, married to a Spanish man, sponsored the Hospital for Women in Cadiz. Vast amounts were donated to the hospital including equipment, a pharmacy, and the decoration of the chapel

¹⁰ **The Dominican convent in Lisbon, Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Our lady of Good Success)** still survives and functions as a school and college. For a useful history see Honor McCabe O.P., *A Light Undimmed. The Story of the Convent of Our Lady of Bom Sucesso, Lisbon, 1639-2006* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2007).

¹¹ **Septs were dynastic lineages, which included landholding, and were based on kinship,** shared names and shared ancestors, although at times this was a person who was greatly admired rather than blood kin.

¹² **James Casey, *Early Modern Spain*** (London: Routledge, 1999), 194-195.

which included sumptuous sculptures, three grandiose tombs for the Irish matrons, and stone slabs with epitaphs and genealogies.

In many towns and cities, and in particular successful port economies like Seville during the sixteenth century and Cadiz during the late seventeenth century, there was a veritable explosion of matronage and investment in buildings for women, and sponsored by women. A case in point is the aforementioned Women's Hospital in Cadiz. Its full name is the Iglesia del Hospital de Nostra Senora del Carmen. The year 1634 saw the construction of one of the first and oldest women's hospitals. This was exclusively for women and girls. Three key Irish matrons were Doña Alfonsa O'Brien, Doña Catalina Warnes and Doña Eugenia Maria Meleroy, who are all buried in the vaults of the hospital chapel. They had all invested heavily in the hospital creating and supporting provision of distinctive wards, children and adult women being separate, infectious diseases separate, and funding for the pharmacy, as well as a fund to purchase small toys for younger children who were confined to bed, but who became bored.¹³ The hospital chapel also included art works by El Greco, his "St. Francis" is still displayed in the chapel today. The hospitals' sculpture collection included "Our Lady of Sorrows" and "St. Catherine of Alexandria."¹⁴ No expense was spared on the hospital building and infrastructure.

Beauty and practicality combine to create a peaceful space for girls and women who needed treatment and never were turned away. Hospital admittance books show women from the peninsular and throughout Europe being treated, and there is reference to a "mulatta" from Africa who was treated.¹⁵ Space was accessed by all. Some Spanish convents developed fairly ascetic ways of living, however, Irish convents never tended to asceticism. Existing Irish convent art collections including that of the Lisbon convent (still

13 Protocolis Cadiz 1024, Archivo Historico Provincial de Cadiz (hereafter AHPC).

14 Today the building serves as an administrative centre for the diocese of Cadiz, however, it operated as a women's hospital until the early 1970s.

15 Protocolis Cadiz 1014, AHPC. Folios not numbered.

a teacher training college for girls) continue to be curated by the nuns. The proliferation of convent art had more than just a religious dimension. The painting of St. Paula in the chapel of the Lisbon convent show how nuns taught girls in small tutored groups, and with books, manuscripts, ink, quills and desks. Schools operated a sliding scale of fees, charging wealthy parents more, and citing the need for equipment for the bibliotecas and scriptoriums.¹⁶

The reign of Philip II saw the proliferation of art, and not just for the private spaces of the wealthy and the elite. Rosemary Mulcahy has recently analysed the filtering down of art in institutional spaces.¹⁷ The use of cheaper materials became common, and a wider constituency of European artists and craftspeople were brought into court and the art world, including a number of women. One, Catalina de Ribera y Mendoza, became a painter at court and beyond.

Catalina was a *be ata*, a lay religious woman. Her matron was Joanna of Austria, wife of Philip II. Catalina was known as the Queen of accessories. However, she in turn sponsored the Irish convent in Seville that had sheltered a cousin of hers who had sought sanctuary from Inquisition investigation. Consequently, a Spanish woman sponsored by the Queen in turn sponsored an Irish convent. The links between Irish and Spanish women existed through sponsorship and also the safety afforded by convent sanctuary.

The filtering down of matronage can also be seen in the investment Irish women made, even when they lived outside of convent spaces. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Irish women sponsored sixteen hospitals in Seville, paying larger amounts to those which were exclusively for women and girls. Three significant female sponsors were Maria Penelope Clan, Elena Josefa Linza and Santiago Moffet. Their sponsorship of missions, including one in the Phillipines shows that women had wide interests

¹⁶ **Protocolis Cadiz 4458, AHPC. Folios not numbered.**

¹⁷ **Rosemary Mulcahy**, *Philip II of Spain, Patron of the Arts* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 14-15.

in missions, particularly Irish ones. They appear to have wished to put their own stamp on catholic projects.¹⁸ An interest in physical geography is evidenced in the wishes of Maria Clan, whose will included the gift of her map collection to female friends.¹⁹ This was by no means a unique gift. Mother Maria Evangelista, Abbess of the convent of St. Anne and St. Joseph in Valladolid had geography on the schools syllabus, and commissioned a painting of herself against a background of books, quills, ink, vellum, books and a globe.²⁰

In Cadiz, Irish women sponsored twenty churches throughout the city, and the charitable projects for the poor and needy. Altogether twenty-two women, from Leonor de Grados, in 1626, to Maria Carmen Barron, in 1783, sponsored churches in the city.²¹ Two convents were also left money in trusts, with strict stipulations about how finance should be consistently donated over the years.²²

They also mediated cultural influences. As well as payments towards book collections in girls schools (many of which were retained despite being included on the banned lists of censored books during the 1590s), they also sponsored the alteration of female symbology. The emergence of *La Divina Pastora*, the virgin shepherdess, was a contentious figure for many ecclesiastics and secular authorities.

The figure of the wholesome pastoral shepherdess was contentious as she represented the rural working woman. This was an image too close to working women, as opposed to the idealised, clinicised Mary. Although *La Divina Pastora* was never as contentious a symbol as Mary Magdalene, with her supposed prostitute past, she was, nevertheless meant to be jettisoned for the

18 **Contratacion 5638; Santo Domingo 111; Ultramar 162, Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI).**

19 **Contratacion 5638, AGI.**

20 **This painting is displayed in the Convent of St. Anne and St. Joseph today.**

21 **Protocolis Cadiz 320; Protocolis Cadiz 5114, AHPC.**

22 **Protocolis Cadiz 5150; Protocolis Cadiz 1024, AHPC.**

more traditional and conservative Mary mother of Christ. Convents retained their sculptures of La Divina Pastora, and Mary Magdalene, with censorship prompting the retention of these figures. The St. Clare convent in Valladolid hid their sculpture of *La Divina Pastora* in a cupboard. The response was similar to the resistance to censorship of book collections.

How widespread were these networks, and what do we know of the meanings and motivations of these female sponsors? Wills are invaluable sources as they often state very clearly what women wished to do with their own money. After the usual instruction about masses, and the division of monies and lands, came the reasoning for this. Irish women were very clear about the fact that they wished to promote female learning. Writing as well as reading was to be taught, as well as language and linguistic skills. In Ireland women were able to leave their money and worldly goods to anyone they chose to, and this tradition continued in Spain. Allyson Poska notes that within Spain, even poor women were able to leave inheritances to their female friends and relatives.²³

Whilst not completely even handed towards both genders, the relatively egalitarian inheritance customs of Castile and Gaelic Ireland had enough in common to allow the continuation of female to female sponsorship. This played some part in the broader context of assimilation, and the ability of both Irish and Spanish women to operate considerable power over not just the money or land which they owned, but other goods too. In this way book collections were gifted and preserved, whilst banned books from male schools and colleges came under scrutiny and were periodically destroyed.²⁴

In Seville three notable Irish matrons, Maria Penelope Clan, Elena Linza and Santiago Moffet, all independently wealthy,

²³ Allyson Poska, *Women and Authority in early Modern Spain. The Peasants of Galicia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 43-46.

²⁴ Many convent book collections from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries still exist as curated collections, like that of the library in the convent of St. Clare in Valladolid. Sadly, others have been broken up as convents have been closed.

specified that their money and property be left to girls' schools, and also to be used in establishing educational projects in South America. Spanish and Irish settlement was central to the colonising process throughout South America. Irish matrons wished to see convents and schools there. The size of these convents drew attention from various Popes, who deemed them to be too large. Attempts were sometimes made to close large convents when the Pope would pronounce that the convent was not in fact a convent, but a city of women. That was the response to a convent reputed to number one thousand women. Not all of the women residing within convent compounds were nuns, some were *be atas*, that is women who made the vows of celibacy and obedience, but not of poverty, in order to control their own finance.

A number of wealthy Irish women lived in the Irish convents of Corpus Christi in Valladolid, and the Dominican convent in La Coruña. These women were often, though not always widows. They made plain in their wills that they wished everything they had, including land and buildings bought in Spain, to go to the convents and their missions and projects.²⁵ In addition, the numbers living in convents were further swelled by pupils, servants and formerly wicked women on the road to reformed behaviour, for example former prostitutes. The dubious figure of Mary Magdalene, the reformed prostitute, loomed large in the fear of papal authorities as well as secular authorities over nuns' work with poor women, and the reforming of their behaviour.

The suspicions attaching to nuns and other women in their communities was one reason for interference, bans, proscriptions and censorship of texts, and art works. Ironically, it was often the religious authorities themselves and their knee-jerk misogynistic reaction to female spaces and choices that forced female religious and their sponsors to circumvent reactionary clampdowns. Convents resisted in the ways they were practised at. The Abbess used her considerable authority to chastise regional archbishops and lesser

church functionaries who tried to censor and destroy books, and interfere with teaching and the curricula. Benedictines would cite the order of St. Benedict, the rule they lived by. Teaching, learning, linguistics, and the broader sponsorship of female learning continued, often in the teeth of opposition. The convent, therefore, continued as a cultural conduit and subversive institution throughout the early modern period.

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*Newcastle upon Tyne
Black Gate, View from the Castle Keep*