

Female religious on the British Isles. Interactions with the Continent (7th-20th century)

Interactions between convents and female religious on the British Isles and the continent were intense as well as diverse throughout the whole medieval, early modern and modern period. Since the early middle ages there were mutual influences between Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Frankish nunneries. Contacts intensified in the centuries after the Norman conquest of England and the formal bounds that existed between England and some French territories until the 15th century. French monastic orders, from Cluny, Cîteaux, Fontevraud, Prémontré and Arrouaise for example, founded convents for female religious in England. At the same time, English nobles supported and entered female convents in Anjou, Aquitaine and Normandy. In the 12th century the English royal house of Plantagenet even made the royal abbey of Fontevraud their official burial place.

Things changed drastically in the early modern period. Since the English Reformation and the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) vast numbers of Catholics left their home country for the continent including many men and women religious and men and women with a religious vocation. Some of them found a new haven in Spain, Portugal, Italy or Bavaria, but northern France and the Southern Netherlands were particularly appealing to these Catholics in exile. The English Carthusians were the first to settle themselves on the continent in 1559, later followed by many other religious communities of men and women. Forty years later the first 'English convent' for English nuns was founded in Brussels. About a dozen others were to follow in the next fifty years, most of them enclosed and contemplative, but often hosting prestigious boarding schools for children of the English Catholic elite.

Most of the English convents on the continent left for their home country as a result of the harsh consequences of the French Revolution and never returned. The interactions between Britain and the continent continued nonetheless. On the one hand, Catholic families kept on sending their sons and daughters to Catholic colleges and boarding schools of religious institutes on the continent. Moreover, many continental cities – Bruges for example – had substantial colonies of British citizens in the 19th and early 20th century. On the other hand, in the eyes of Catholic continental Europe, Britain had become an important missionary area. Due to the modest emancipation of British Catholics and the large numbers of Irish immigrants since the first half of the 19th century, British Catholics were in great need of church personnel, charity and education. With concession of the new Catholic hierarchy in Britain, priests, male religious and a significant number of catholic sisters left the continent – especially from Italy, France and Belgium – for Britain, wanting to restore Catholic structures and to found new religious communities. Around the same time some religious institutes – Belgian Redemptorist sisters and Zusters van Liefde from Ghent for example – decided to start missionary activities in Catholic Ireland.

Despite the lack of abundant sources, medieval female monasteries on the British Isles and the continent have been studied by a number of historians, none of them specifically focussing though on the interactions between both sides. Although significant for the survival of English Catholicism, the early-modern English convents on the continent were only recently made an important topic for scholarly research. Conferences and research projects (Englishmen Adrift (Ghent, 2006); Who were the Nuns? (Queen Mary, 2008-2011) on the topic of English Catholics and convents in exile have been funded at English and Flemish universities. The 19th and 20th-century interactions have received some attention as part of the growing interest in the history of religious institutes in England and Ireland in the last decades of the 20th century. On the continental side, we lack comprehensive material about the missionary movement towards England and Ireland and must rely on studies about individual missionaries and monographs about religious institutes.

A lot of questions remain to be answered with regard to the medieval interactions, the early modern exile of English religious and convents and the modern flow of women religious and religious institutes from the continent to Britain and Ireland. First of all, who were these women that crossed boundaries to live their lives of religious vocation on both sides of the North Sea? What can we say about their motives? How significant, for example, was the idea – fostered by the growing interest in the past – of an 'historical debt' towards the Irish, English, Welsh and Scottish missionaries who

played an important role in the early medieval Christianisation of the continent? How can we describe the influence – religious and cultural as well as political and economical – of these ‘foreigners’ abroad, whether we talk about medieval ‘conquerors’, exiled English sisters in northern France and the Southern Netherlands or about religious from continental institutes in 19th- and 20th-century Britain and Ireland? Which routes and networks were used to shape these interactions and which elements were crucial to make them persist on a long-term basis? How can we characterise their mutual contacts and their relationships with local and church authorities?

All these questions will be discussed at the 2010 annual conference of the History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland (H-WRBI), in cooperation with KADOC-KULeuven. The conference is scheduled to take place in Leuven from 1 to 4 September 2010. The conference venue will be the Louvain Institute for Ireland in Europe. Proposals for papers (max. 500 words, including a title), together with a curriculum vitae and a list of publications, should be addressed to Kristien Suenens (kristien.suenens@kadoc.kuleuven.be) before March 1st 2010. Replies will follow no later than April 1st 2010. Information about the conference can be found on the H-WRBI website at <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Bedford-Centre/history-women-religious/events.html>.

The proceedings of the conference will, subject to peer review, be published by Leuven University Press in the series KADOC-Studies on Religion, Culture and Society (series also distributed in the USA and Canada by Cornell University Press).