

Creating a Scottish Church: Catholicism, Gender and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Scotland

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Midst the foe, and the stranger she seeks not renown

She courts not their smiles, and she heeds not their frowns

Could she only impart unto childhood and youth

The science of God, of religion, and truth... (p. 110)

Written in 1854 by Bishop Alexander Smith as a tribute to Veronica Cordier, the co-foundress of the Franciscan Sisters in Glasgow, this poem, which Karly Kehoe unearthed within the religious community's archives, in many ways encapsulates the broader themes which she explores in her fascinating survey of Catholicism in 19th-century Scotland. Her important and innovative study charts new territory through examining the intersections of gender, ethnicity (Irish, English and European) and an adaptive religiosity against the backdrop of rapid urbanization, contested nationalism and the slow development of social welfare services. This ambitious agenda is supported by a rich, diverse and little-utilized source base, encompassing private collections, the archives of various religious orders and the centralised Scottish Catholic Archives. The result is a wide-ranging and synoptic survey of important aspects of the resurgence of Catholicism in Scotland and the transformation of 'a broken and underground church on the periphery of Scottish society ... (to) an empowered and mobilised force on the nation's religious and political landscape'

(p. 175). Kehoe's revisionist critique seeks to incorporate Catholicism as a multi-faceted institution into a 19th-century national, Presbyterian narrative whilst at the same time to acknowledge the ways in which it complicated an uncritically projected, homogeneous British Protestant identity. This review will examine this broader and important argumentative strategy through the divergent frameworks employed by the author: gender, ethnicity and Ultramontane Catholicism.

I

The central part played by women in the transformation of religious cultures in the 19th century has emerged as a concerted area of study in the last decade, led by the pioneering work of Lesley Orr (1), Callum Brown (2), Susan Mumm (3) and most recently by Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries.(4) Kehoe's study builds on this research base, asserting that the 'role played by women ... across the denominational spectrum' (p. 67) converged around shared ideals of femininity and morality and 'the belief that the reform of society would ultimately be accomplished through the pious influence of women' (p. 69). Her study develops this agenda further by exploring the agency of women, from both working class and middle class backgrounds, who pursued their own constructions of these feminine ideals *outside* the conventional sites for their articulation, namely marriage and motherhood. At its heart, it is a study of a number of energetic women of religious conviction who embraced a life of celibacy and service in several newly-founded religious foundations in Scotland, mostly emanating from French congregations, but attracting impressive numbers of local postulants. Religious life for these women represented an alternative strategy for carving out an identity and for undertaking meaningful work, and Kehoe effectively demonstrates that in Catholic circles it was these women religious who were chiefly engaged in the increasingly necessary social welfare work targeted at women and girls. Her inquiry seeks to illuminate the lives of these little-studied philanthropic 'foot soldiers' and to illustrate the ways in which they were 'pivotal and cooperative protagonists in a changing church' (p. 70).

Kehoe's groundbreaking portrait of Scottish women religious – the institutions they established, the professional skills they offered and the religious authority they possessed – lies at the heart of her study of a changing Catholic church and the emergence of a unified Catholic culture (p. 74). Through an exacting excavation of the archives, she recounts the little-known history of the foundation and recruitment of women religious in Glasgow and Edinburgh, contextualized against the explosion of contemplative and active orders throughout Europe, but most especially in France, where approximately 200,000 women joined over 400 religious orders between 1800 and 1880.(5) Chapter three offers a pioneering comparative juxtaposition of the predominantly upper-class and highly influential Ursulines of Jesus (founded in Edinburgh and attracting the daughters of the Scottish and English elite) and the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Glasgow and their burgeoning community in the 1850s, which attracted both Irish and Scottish entrants. Finally, the study of the operation of the Irish-founded Sisters of Mercy in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, hampered slightly by limited archival access, offers an opportunity to examine differences in the Catholic religious landscape, inflected through class and ethnicity, in the Eastern and Western districts of the country. These textured case studies of the 'agency of collective female action' (p. 74) testify to the concerted activity and resourcefulness of these providers of cradle-to-grave spiritual and material welfare. It also explores their collaborations and conflicts with male clergy who, like Bishop Alexander Smith, sometimes valued their enthusiasm and efforts but in other instances 'regularly interfered with convent affairs because they were uncomfortable with women who crossed traditional boundaries and "modified" gender limitations to acquire moral authority' (p. 91). Kehoe's historical sketches of these religious communities give vivid examples of the personalities and issues that elicited these differences and tensions, but is also to be welcomed for the much needed texture it gives to the context in which these women operated, namely a rapidly expanding and increasingly self-confident Scottish Catholic community characterized by marked (and potentially divisive) heterogeneity.

II

Kehoe provides a long historical trajectory when charting the ethnic, class-based and political diversity of Scottish Catholicism in the 19th century. Her opening chapter describes the state of the denomination up to

1834, sketching a fragile faith on the margins of national life, tainted by its association with Jacobite causes and sensitive to a pervasive anti-Catholicism which was as much ‘a consequence of Presbyterianism’s divisions and increasing vulnerability as it was of Scotland’s changing self-image thanks to empire and industrial enterprise’ (p. 28). The relief legislation passed two decades after the English equivalent (1793) was greeted by a Scottish Catholicism that understood and presented itself as indigenous and localised – a world away from the unified, Rome-focused and centralising Catholic culture of the later Victorian period. This introduction lays the groundwork for Kehoe’s discussion in chapter two of the arrival of the Irish *en masse* after 1800, the reorganization of the church in 1827, and the activities of prominent Scottish middle- and upper-middle class converts who used their religious convictions as an impetus to campaign for social and moral change in ways that mirrored the activities of their liberal, Protestant countrymen. Throughout the chapters that follow on the religious foundations, the development of Catholic education and the evolution of associational and devotional cultures, these cultural and class-based frictions between Irish and Scottish Catholics, between Oxbridge-educated Ultramontane converts and working-class Irish immigrants, some of whom brought Home Rule aspirations to their adopted country, are well illustrated.

Kehoe is particularly effective when describing the ethnic fissures within religious communities and the concerted efforts of the Hierarchy to ensure the ‘Scottish’ character of women religious, given their elevated role in representing and reproducing a Catholic culture. The numbers of Irish-born religious within the established orders were closely monitored, and the Bishops placed a strong premium on Scottish female superiors (p. 93). The internal politics at the Mercy convent and amongst the Franciscan sisters are proffered as telling vignettes in a cultural war to assert Scotch authority, culminating in 1867 when the Archbishop of Westminster, Henry Manning, was sent by Rome to Scotland to investigate and quell the ‘racial antipathy’ and ‘mutual prejudices’ (p. 103) which were seen to threaten church stability. These efforts to dilute the Irishness of the Catholic migrants in Scotland were redoubled in areas of education, given its appreciation as key to the shaping of a national Catholic culture and Kehoe provides an animated description of the ‘determined effort to install recusant or Scottish-born women sympathetic to national traditions to convent leadership positions’ (p. 128). Women religious’ positions as teachers, welfare workers and role models were understood as playing a crucial part in forging a loyal nationalist identity and minimising the influence of Irish Catholicism on Catholicism in Scotland. An important contribution to the historiography is also made through Kehoe’s investigation of the more pronounced anti-Irish sentiments found in the West of Scotland compared with the East, in Glasgow as opposed to Edinburgh. The differing levels of urbanization, industrialization and the marked ethnic differentials attributable to a more populous working-class, migrant community congregated by the Clyde gave these cities different characters. Kehoe’s exploration of the different types of educational offering provided by these teaching sisters illustrates well the marked diversity within the Catholic community and the enlistment of these female religious to shape the ways in which these various enclaves imagined and enacted their relationship to the church and the nation.

III

Alongside her discussion of the role of sisters and nuns in ministering to the ‘stranger’ and socialising the ‘youth’, Kehoe also seeks to map her study of Scottish Catholicism onto a much wider debate about the rise of Ultramontane Catholicism in the 19th century throughout Europe.⁽⁶⁾ The author asserts that while not necessarily Ultramontane themselves, it was women religious who pulled Scotland closer to Rome (p. 69) and who served Ultramontanist as well as nationalist ends (p. 129). It is these field workers, she argues, who were the chief promoters of an evolving and distinctively Catholic, unified, Rome-centred and markedly gendered visual and material culture. This is a tantalising argument which Kehoe only briefly explores in her final chapter, and one that could well be extended in other national contexts following on from Carmen Mangion’s timely exploration of similar themes in England and Wales.⁽⁷⁾

While ultimately well conceived, Kehoe’s stated aspirations to challenge notions of a Catholic ‘ghetto’ (p. 149) and to illuminate the ways in which these Catholic associational cultures and forms of ‘civic engagement’ embodied values and aspirations shared with liberal, reforming Scottish Presbyterian society, is not fully realised. The author over-stretches her argument in attempting to link the various sodalities, processions, educational initiatives and reforming societies which evolved in Scotland to hierarchy-led,

tailored initiatives to counter Fenianism, women's quest for the franchise and working-class marginalization. Her argument about the preeminent role played by these sisters in 'producing good Catholics and to making the Catholic community as a whole respectable, obedient and loyal to church and state' (p. 179) is surely correct, but a much more detailed, textured study would be required to make good the links she intuits, but does not elucidate, between the education of girls and their future socializing roles as mothers, or the work of religious orders towards the dilution of radicalism in working-class communities. This is an area which would benefit from much more sustained research, extending in fact beyond the influence of women religious alone, but Kehoe is to be congratulated for laying some of the essential foundations for this further exploration, in addition to the relationship between Scottish nationalism and convert Catholicism, which she also identifies as warranting more focused attention (p. 53).

Considered in its entirety, Karly Kehoe's erudite and engaging study of the essential role of women religious in shaping the religious cultures of 19th-century Catholicism makes good its aspiration to illuminate the complexity of Catholic identity in Scotland and to explore the ways in which a resilient migrant ethnic identity was 'grafted to a broader Scottish identity' (p. 175). More than a century later when contemporary Scotland, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom, continues to play host to 'A8' accession migrants (many of whom are Catholic) as well as a growing and ethnically-diverse Islamic community, this highly readable case study of 19th-century intersections between gender, ethnicity and religiosity has considerable contemporary resonance. This commendable inquiry into the ways in which a religious minority retained a sense of its own distinctiveness while seeking to incorporate itself into civic society and the national narrative, charts new territory in the historiography and reminds the reader that debates about migration and its effects on a nation's religious and political landscape have a longstanding genealogy

Notes

1. L. Orr MacDonald, *A Unique and Glorious Mission: Women and Presbyterianism in Scotland, 1830–1930* (Edinburgh, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (2nd edition, Abingdon, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (London, 1999).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940*, ed. S. Morgan and J. de Vries, (London, 2010).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For a broader discussion, see J. A. K. McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Susan O'Brien, 'Religious life for women', in *From Without the Flaminian Gate: 150 Years of Roman Catholicism in England and Wales, 1850–2000*, ed. V. A. McClelland and M. Hodgetts (London, 1999), pp. 108–41; and F. J. O'Hagan, *The Contribution of Religious Orders to Education in Glasgow during the Period 1847–1918* (Lewiston, NY, 2006).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For background, see A. R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth, 1961); *Catholicism in Britain and France since 1789*, ed. F. Tallett and N. Atkin (London, 1991) and in an English context, J. F. Supple, 'Ultramontaniam in Yorkshire, 1850–1900' in *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume IV, Interpretations*, ed. G. Parsons (Manchester, 1992), pp. 135–49 and Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotions in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1995).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Carmen Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (Manchester, 2008).[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5481>