

# Exiled Children: Care in English Convents in the 17th and 18th Centuries

Claire Walker

*ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Department of History, School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, The University of Adelaide, 5005, Australia*

England's Catholic religious minority devised various strategies for its survival in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the establishment of seminaries and convents in continental Europe, predominantly in France and the Spanish Netherlands. These institutions educated the next generation of English Catholic clergy, nuns and lay householders. Although convent schools were usually small, the nuns educated young girls within their religious cloisters. The pupils followed a modified monastic routine, while they were taught the skills appropriate for young gentlewomen, such as music and needlework. While many students were placed in convents with the intention that they would become nuns, not all girls followed this trajectory. Some left the cloister of their childhood to join other religious houses or to return to England to marry and raise a new generation of Catholics. Although we have few first-hand accounts of these girls' experiences, it is possible to piece together a sense of their lives behind cloistered walls from chronicles, obituaries and letters. While the exiled monastic life for children was difficult, surviving evidence points to the vital role of convent care in Catholic families' strategies, and the acknowledgement of their importance by the girls placed there, whether temporarily or permanently.

■ **Keywords:** adolescents, children, education, spirituality, women

In the early 1780s, Jane Huddleston, who was aged between 5 and 8 years, wrote from the English Augustinian Convent in Bruges where she was at school to her parents in Cambridge, Ferdinand and Mary. Amidst the usual pleasantries and news of kin, Jenny (as she was known in the family) reassured her mother and father of her own wellbeing, writing 'I begin to be a little accustomed to school which was rather difficult at first' (Van Hyning, 2012, p. 302). Jane, and her older sister Mary (called Polly by the family) were educated in Bruges, and later Paris, in cloisters which had been established by English Catholic women in the early 17th century. After the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century and the closure of monasteries in England for men and women, religious houses were founded in exile in Continental Europe. Cloisters of nuns prayed for the reconversion of their homeland to Catholicism, but they also educated the next generation of English Catholic wives and mothers to ensure the survival of their religion. In this paper, I want to consider the care of children in these religious houses.

There is surprisingly little scholarship on Catholic children in early modern institutions, other than those caring

for the unwanted or destitute. The picture painted of these founding hospitals and orphanages is bleak, overshadowed by statistics detailing high mortality rates amongst inmates, suggesting that the care they provided was harsh, even inhumane (Boswell, 1988, p. 433; Levene, 2006). There is a more positive assessment of the intervention by St Vincent de Paul's charitable religious orders from the mid-17th century, but the focus remains upon abandoned children (Pullan, 1989, pp. 12–13). Not all institutionalised boys and girls were impoverished and unwanted, however. Many lived in establishments where people other than kin educated, trained and employed them. Monastic cloisters comprised one such organisation. Parents placed children,

---

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Claire Walker, Senior Lecturer, Associate Investigator & Adelaide Node Deputy Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Department of History, School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, The University of Adelaide, 5005, Australia. E-mail: [claire.i.walker@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:claire.i.walker@adelaide.edu.au)

predominantly girls, in convent care to have them raised and educated in a religious environment.<sup>1</sup>

'Care' remains a notoriously difficult term to define, even in the modern context (Held, 2006). Whilst it encompasses tending to physical and developmental needs in a safe environment, increasingly the emotional wellbeing of those in care is deemed important (Blazek and Kraftl, 2015). In early modern convents, care included the provision of physical and developmental support, and even acknowledged the importance of emotional health. But this occurred in an era of political and religious instability when forming a 'governable subject' who followed the right religious confession was paramount (Smith, 2011). Moreover, in a patriarchal society, the socialisation of girls to fulfil their future careers as obedient wives and good mothers formed an additional dimension to the care provided.

This paper seeks therefore to explore the nature and purpose of care in English convents in the 17th and 18th centuries, and to understand the experience of children placed within these institutions. It is grounded in the assumption that whilst there are correspondences between early modern and contemporary understandings, care is also historically contingent upon religious, social, gender and political norms. It contends therefore that the imperatives underpinning care plans in these institutions reflected the objectives and values of their time, and reveal 17th-century ideals and realities, which are often at odds with modern understandings and sensibilities. More specifically, it advances an understanding of the place of convent care in the spiritual and social strategies of a religious minority.

Grounded in qualitative analysis of surviving documents, the scope of the study is necessarily limited by the nature of this material. Sources detailing individual experiences, like the brief suggestion of unhappiness but resignation in Jenny Huddleston's letter, are few and far between. However, it is possible to discover a framework for the convents' care of children in their chronicles, statutes and conduct books. Biographies, obituaries, letters and diaries provide an insight into certain children's experience of these Catholic institutions, as well as the impact of their time in care upon their lives as adults. The paper is in four parts. The first section provides the historical and historiographical background. The second considers the age of admission to convents. The third part explores the developmental and emotional dimension of care. In the final section, case studies present the experience and outcomes of convent care.

## Historical Background

Childhood was conceived of differently in the 17th and 18th centuries. There was no universal youthful experience, with individual children's situation dependent upon a range of factors, amongst which social status and gender were particularly important. Scholars have identified specific phases in a young person's life, which roughly translate into infancy, childhood and adolescence, although the ages for these cate-

gories have fluid boundaries. Children commonly remained under parental care until they were aged between 7 and 13 years, and then would be sent to school, or apprenticed to learn a trade, or placed in domestic service in another household, depending upon their parents' economic standing. Girls of higher social status remained at home under maternal care for longer than their brothers, and were educated for their future as wives and mothers (Ferraro, 2012).

Although born into nuclear families to parents who, contrary to some earlier debates about emotional attachment, did love and cherish them, children were members of patriarchal households. In early modern families, everyone was expected to adhere to strict social and gender norms and individual interests were commonly subservient to the family's financial, political and socio-economic strategies. For elite women in Catholic Europe, this might mean life as a nun. Convent dowries were considerably cheaper, so if some daughters took the veil, parents could provide a substantial dowry and thereby secure a good marriage for just one or two girls. This practice was especially common in early modern Italy, where convents were reportedly filled with women whose lack of a genuine religious vocation exemplified Protestant criticism of the cloister (Schutte, 2011; Sperling, 1999). Whilst not all such nuns were as outspoken as the celebrated Arcangela Tarabotti, who, at the age of 11 years, was consigned to a monastic future in the Venetian Convent of Sant'Anna in 1617, accounts of worldliness, excessive socialising and incidences of sexual scandal suggest that forced vocations devalued the spiritual status of monasticism. Yet, these religious institutions have also been considered as vital civic resources for the patrician and city elites which sponsored them and benefited from the nuns' spiritual patronage and the perceived political kudos wealthy cloisters bestowed upon their sponsors (Hills, 2004; Strasser, 2004). Regardless of the positive or negative experience of the women who became nuns, the place of convents in family strategy is testament to the dominance of corporate interests over those of children in the early modern world.

This was particularly the case for post-Reformation English Catholic families whose religious non-conformity rendered them subject to different pressures to those felt by their Protestant neighbours. Kate Gibson has argued that the economic and political stress brought to bear upon the Catholic gentry and aristocracy by double taxes and restricted access to other sources of income, like crown appointments, meant that the education and marriage of their children was crucial for both religious preservation and family survival. In the century from 1680 when individual choice and emotional attachment in marriage were becoming more important considerations for the wider community, for Catholic children, these factors remained subservient to 'religious and dynastic duty' (Gibson, 2016, p. 149). Yet, whilst gentry families, like the Throckmortons of Coughton in Warwickshire, weathered the economic turbulence of high taxation and possible forfeiture of their estates through a strategic mix of lucrative marriages, monastic vocations and adroit

political and social alliances, English convents were not subject to the extensive forced religious professions experienced in Italy. Women joined them for a range of reasons, with varying degrees of volition (Bowden, 2013, pp. 58, 64–65; Scott, 2009, pp. 178–179, 190, 200–1; Walker, 2003, pp. 30–38). Moreover, in the same way that Italian religious houses were important markers of civic, social and spiritual prestige, so the English convents connected England's Catholic minority with continental piety and culture.

Both Protestants and Catholics deemed education an essential ingredient in the formation of confessional identity and inculcation of a firm sense of religious and family obligation. As members of a religious minority with no access to schools locally which might foster these values, Catholic parents who could afford the expense of education abroad sent their sons and daughters across the English Channel to the monasteries, colleges and convents founded by men and women who had exiled themselves to pursue this Catholic form of life. Several generations of Throckmorton daughters were educated in these religious communities where a blend of reading, writing, numeracy, home economics, gentlewomanly pastimes and devotional instruction instilled the 'accomplishments and habits of mind which the Throckmorton girls took with them back to England' (Scott, 2009, pp. 187–188). Although this family has been noted as particularly successful in surviving the vagaries of non-conformity, they were not alone in considering convents a vital resource in the quest to remain solvent whilst preserving the faith for later generations. Institutional care for children was accordingly an important part of Catholic family strategy for religious, economic and political survival.

### The Age of Children in Convent Care

Children had been placed in monastic houses from the earliest centuries. They were known as 'child oblates' – that is, children vowed and given to the monastic life by their parents. They would enter institutions at a young age to be raised by the monks or nuns until they were old enough to become monks or nuns themselves. There were many reasons for the practice of oblation, many of them tied to the economic wellbeing of the family. Like Italian patriicians in the 16th and 17th centuries, medieval parents consigned children, most commonly daughters, to monasteries to enhance their siblings' opportunities for advancement. Other child oblates were given to religious houses because they were illegitimate, disabled, unwanted stepchildren or the progeny of incestuous relationships. Poverty was another factor. During times of economic crisis, the number of oblates rose, suggesting that parents unable to feed their children hoped that they might survive famine through the mercy of the nuns and monks. There was also a spiritual rationale for the practice. In the middle ages, people believed in the need for prayer and penance to achieve salvation. Giving a child to God in monasticism accordingly bestowed

religious credit upon parents, and enhanced the chance for their souls to be saved (Boswell, 1984).

Obviously, such practices were open to abuse, and, in 1563, the Council of Trent, which reformed Catholicism in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, forbade girls and boys under the age of 16 years from taking monastic vows. But the Council's decrees did not preclude younger girls from entering cloisters with a view to becoming nuns. Although it was anathema to force women into convents, girls aged 12 years and above could be clothed in religious habits and begin their novitiate (Schroeder, 1941, pp. 226, 228). Monasteries could therefore continue to accept adolescent oblates legitimately; and many houses took in younger children, who remained in the school until they were old enough for the novitiate. Founded after Trent, the English convents' distance from the nuns' homeland, coupled with the Council's reforms, provided a different dynamic with respect to the practice of oblation. On the one hand, the religious houses' statutes upheld Tridentine law and forbade the clothing and profession of children. The expense and logistics of sending daughters from England across the Channel also precluded large-scale presentment of young girls from families unable to make provision for a socially acceptable marriage. However, religious and political turmoil in England during the 17th and 18th centuries, and increased pressure on religious non-conformists, saw high numbers of Catholics seeking temporary or permanent exile abroad. They often sought refuge in the towns and cities housing English religious establishments, where there was already an expatriate community of co-religionists. It was from this group that children commonly found their way into the convents.

However, many women made the difficult and expensive journey from England to be educated by the nuns, perhaps with a view to them developing a religious vocation. Recusancy legislation promulgated by the English Parliament made it illegal for children to receive a Catholic education.<sup>2</sup> A statute of 1585 (27 Eliz. c, 2) forbade parents and guardians sending children overseas to colleges and convents. The penalty was a fine of 100 pounds for each offence. This prohibition was made permanent by James I's parliament in 1603 (1 Jac. 1, iv). The implementation of this legislation was sketchy, but it nonetheless acted as a deterrent to some. Others risked imprisonment and fines to journey abroad, and convent chronicles contain stories of girls' 'heroic' escape from the authorities to reach the Continent. Helen and Clare Copley, who arrived at the Louvain Augustinian cloister in 1610, were temporarily waylaid by a justice of the peace in Southwark. They were subject to 'house arrest' in an inn, until their mother negotiated their freedom and they departed hastily for the Low Countries (Hamilton, 1904, pp. 114–115). Others were more fortunate, relying on long-established networks of couriers and guides who made a living transporting Catholics. Several generations of Throckmorton girls and their Catholic kin were educated abroad. In the 18th century, Sir Robert Throckmorton, whose two

sisters were taught first by the Conceptionists in Paris, commonly known as the 'Blue Nuns' for the colour of the mantle they wore, and later by the Augustinian canonesses in the Rue Fossés-Saint-Victor, sent several daughters and nieces to the Augustinians where his sister, Anne (in religion, Anne Frances), had become a nun in 1687. Between 1700 and 1720, Sir Robert's seven daughters were cared for in convent schools, transported safely there and back by trusted family friends and associates (Gibson, 2016, p.149; Scott, 2009, pp. 184, 187).

Most children who received care in English convents did so in their schools. Not all the cloisters had them, and those that existed were generally small, accommodating and teaching about a dozen pupils, although fashionable ones might have up to 30 girls. Some of the larger and more popular were those of the aforementioned Paris Augustinian canonesses and 'Blue Nuns', as well as the Augustinian and Franciscan cloisters in Bruges (Bowden, 1999, p. 80; Walker, 2003, pp. 92–93). Strict monastic enclosure, imposed upon all female religious houses by the Council of Trent, necessitated the pupils' admission to the cloister and this invariably limited the nuns' capacity to educate larger numbers.<sup>3</sup> Research thus far on the English convent schools suggests that they contained a combination of girls who it was hoped would become nuns (termed 'convictresses') and lay girls, who were there purely for education. 'Convictresses' started in the school, then progressed into the novitiate. Some did become nuns, but Caroline Bowden (2013, p. 55) has recently shown that a significant number of women who entered convents did not. Although her figures include older entrants who were not children, she found that for the 73 women who became 'Blue Nuns' in Paris between 1658 and 1792, another 42 had left the cloister. Bowden's research suggests that the tradition of forced child oblation was weak in this institution, and the other English cloisters too.

Yet, the tender age at which some girls entered monastic schools suggests that vestiges of oblation lingered in some parents' child-rearing practice. In 1660, the Augustinian canonesses in Bruges accepted Ursula Babthorpe, aged 8 years. In 1701, they took in 'little Miss Petre' at the youthful age of 5 years; and in 1710, Mary Gifford, who was only 4 years, entered the cloister, having been 'promised to my Lady Lucy [the prioress] as soon as the child was born' (Durrant, 1925, pp. 257, 433). Gifford was not an isolated case. In 1670, the 'Blue Nuns' admitted a 4-year-old child (Gillow & Trappes-Lomax, 1910, p. 21). In the most extreme example, Lady Barbara Campbell, the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Argyll, was entrusted to the care of Abbess Mary Percy of the Brussels Benedictine cloister, at the immature age of 3 years. In 1628, she entered the convent school where she remained until 1644, when she made her religious profession. Barbara (in religion, Melchiora) Campbell most closely resembles a medieval oblate, and she was evidently unsettled in her life as a nun. In 1657, she asked to be transferred from Brussels to another English Benedictine abbey at Cambrai. No sooner had she entered the Cambrai cloister in 1669

than she requested a return to Brussels. She was permitted to do so in 1676, and she remained in the house where she had lived for almost her entire life until her death in 1688 (Gillow, 1913, p. 50). Conversely, Mary Gifford, promised by her father to the Bruges Augustinians from birth, lacked a religious vocation and ultimately married (Durrant, 1925, p. 433).

It is highly likely that impressionable children, like Barbara Campbell, raised in the monastic environment with little experience of the world outside would find it difficult to reject cloistered life, particularly if under pressure from their family and the nuns. Lucy Hamilton 'was dedicated to religion by her parents when she was but eight years old' (Bowden, 2013, p. 57). Placed in the Augustinian convent in Bruges as a schoolgirl in 1648, she made her monastic profession in 1656, and remained in the cloister until her death in 1693. Her widowed mother joined the convent in 1674, and she had two sisters who were nuns in other religious communities, along with 10 aunts and a cousin (*Who were the Nuns?* [WWTN], Hamilton). Lucy was clearly destined for the monastic life if her family history is anything to go by, and it is possible that she was happy to follow in her aunts' footsteps. But it is equally likely that she felt she had little choice but to remain permanently because so many female relatives were nuns.

The consequence of a pressured vocation can be seen in the troubled career of the 'Blue Nun', Lucy (in religion, Mechtildis) Fortescue. Professed in the English Franciscan convent at Nieupoort in 1649, Lucy Fortescue became a founding member of the Conceptionist house in Paris in 1658. Its annals report permission for her to return to England in 1660 and 1661; then, in 1663, the annalist reveals that Fortescue 'grew very discontented, pretending to be forced to Religion by her mother & that she was professed under age'. The nuns were quick to deny the latter claim, but conceded that her accusation of parental pressure might be legitimate, so they permitted her another visit to England. Upon her return to Paris, Fortescue flatly refused to enter the convent, requesting to live amongst the nuns as a boarder, free to come and go as she pleased. They could not permit this for fear of damaging the cloister's reputation and so allowed her to return to England (Gillow & Trappes-Lomax, 1910, pp. 11, 13, 14–15). Whilst she may or may not have been in convent care from early childhood, Lucy Fortescue's story demonstrates that parental pressure for daughters to be nuns was an ongoing reality in some families.

Therefore, although the English convents adhered to Tridentine decrees concerning the legal age for monastic profession, there is considerable evidence to suggest that many girls entered cloisters extremely young, often with a view to them taking the veil once their schooling had ended. The outcome for such children was mixed. Most were apparently not forced to become nuns, but some evidently experienced a degree of parental coercion and subsequently regretted making religious vows. Whilst the available data differentiates the English convents from their Italian

counterparts, the placement of small children in the schools and evidence that some families intended their daughters to become nuns, even if in the end they did not do so, suggests that English Catholics considered convent care as a possible trajectory to a monastic life. The next section will consider the daily regime of life in convent care to evaluate how it provided for the developmental and emotional needs of the children.

## Care and Education in English Religious Cloisters

Life in the convent was a mixture of discipline, learning, religious observance and recreation. Although living inside the cloister precinct, the children had their own quarters and were not supposed to interact much with the nuns (Bowden, 1999, 81). Certain religious women were given the task of caring for them and teaching them. Although the quotidian routines of those destined to take the veil and those only seeking an education were most likely the same, sources suggest there were differences. In the English Franciscan convent in Bruges, the 1641 statutes included a chapter outlining the children's daily regime. Titled 'Howers w<sup>ch</sup> the Scollers Observe' (Cross Bush, Franciscan MS 6b, fols 88r-v) the document reveals the strong focus on religious formation in convent care:

They rise at six a clocke and says their prayers then heares the covent Masse, w<sup>ch</sup> ended they goe to breakfast, at 8 a clocke it ringes to the workehouse, then they saye veni creator and deprofundis w<sup>ch</sup> ended they goe to worke till halfe an hower after ten, then to dinner and after recreates till halfe an hower after twelve; then it ringes and they saye o gloriosa Domina after w<sup>ch</sup> they goe to their Musicke, writing and Booke, so spending the aftern none till fower a clocke, then recreates till the halfe hower, at w<sup>ch</sup> time it rings and they goe to their prayers meditation is to be red, then they say their pater noster, and a crownerie of our Blessed Ladie. Halfe an hower after five they ringe to supper, and at 8 to Bedd having Sayd their prayers they must be abed by the halfe hower.

The girls following this schedule were most likely aged between 12 and 15 years old (Douai Abbey, W.M.L. MS C2, fol. 525). What is apparent is that their daily routine more or less followed that of the nuns, with prayer forming the framework around which work, study, meals and recreation were placed. For women destined to become nuns themselves, the care they received as children habituated them to a life of monastic observance from the moment they arrived in the cloister.

Younger children, or those not destined to take the veil, followed a regimen more focussed upon education, but with a strong element of religious observance included. At the popular Augustinian Convent in Paris, the school day began at 8 o'clock and included lessons in reading, writing, casting account, sewing, embroidery, tapestry, and flower making; and possibly music, making sweetmeats and pastry, art and/or dancing if their parents were paying for

these extracurricular activities. The pupils attended Mass, followed by gospel reading at a quarter past nine, after which they returned to schoolwork. 11 o'clock was dinnertime and, like the nuns, the girls ate in silence, or listened to a religious reading. Recreation was permitted between dining and 1 o'clock, when they returned to the schoolroom. At 3 o'clock, they went to Vespers and afterwards rote-learned the catechism. Between supper and bedtime at 8 o'clock, they had more free time, but it was spent under the watchful eye of the nun who supervised their care. The children were permitted 1 day a week which was free from this rigid regime (Bowden, 1999, p. 83). At the Augustinian school in Bruges, the day followed much the same pattern of prayer and lessons. Whilst the girls were taught French and Latin, they were also coached in standards of etiquette, suitable for young women of their social status (Durrant, 1925, pp. 424–428).

The Paris school's curriculum was similar to those offered by other convents and reveals the purpose of a convent education. First and foremost, children learned the precepts of their religion and participated in its prayers and rituals. But they were also taught a range of other subjects and skills which would equip them for the only two options open to Catholic women of their social status in the 17th century – the life of a nun, or that of a wife, running a gentry household and raising children. Many schools explained how they catered for both alternatives. At the English Sepulchrine nuns' school in Liège, children were provided with an education deemed appropriate for young gentlewomen:

This order admitted *Convictices*, or *Pensioners*, who be yet children, or young Gentlewomen, desirous of good breeding. These they bring up until they be ripe enough to choose some state of life. They teach them all qualities befitting their sex, as writing, reading, needle-work, French, musick. (*Brief Relation*, 1652, pp. 53–54)

*A Brief Relation of the Order and Institute, of the English Religious Women at Liège* makes it abundantly clear that not all girls entering convent schools were expected to become nuns. Whilst the curriculum was strictly gendered, and strongly focussed upon religious formation, it was also practical, aiming to equip students with skills useful for life both inside and outside the cloister.

The convent documents pertaining to the children placed in the nuns' care discussed thus far suggest that there was little scope for childish levity and affectionate relationships. Play was limited to designated periods and the mistresses in charge of the young girls were warned against forming close attachments with them, just as the nuns were supposed to eschew close friendships with one another. Yet, convents did recognise the psychological dangers of cloistered life for children. Although exhorted to exact strict discipline and not to display too much affection or familiarity, mistresses were also warned to be sensitive to their charges' mental health (Douai Abbey, W.M.L. MS Qu2, fol. 79; Durrant, 1925, p. 428). The nuns were told to 'often cheere them up

encourage & commend them for what they do, or endeavour to do well, rather than being overly critical of youthful failings (Douai Abbey, W.M.L. MS Qu2, fol. 81). This was because:

The principal inconvenience incident to young Religious is sadness or melancholie, which will endanger both the health of their body, & welfare of their soul: this occasioned by frequent breking their nature, suffering mortifications & reprehensions, silence, solitude etc. which cannot but sadden most beginners, till by growing into a custome they become natural. (Douai Abbey, W.M.L. MS Qu2, fols. 80–81)

In addition to the advice that mistresses ‘must often cherish them with kind & friendly looks & speeches’, ‘play-days’ were recommended. There should be at least one afternoon a week set aside for such sociability, but it was also suggested that when the weather was fine, ‘let them keep their recreation hower after dinner in the Orchard in playing, dancing walking etc.’ The advice was also sensitive towards different age groups, recommending: ‘Make all the young ons thus to recreate together on play-days, & those recreation hours (Leaving others to their liberty) . . . In which they must have all the freedom imaginable without any reprehension’ (Douai Abbey, W.M.L. MS Qu2, fol. 81).

Obviously not all cloisters received such enlightened advice, but it seems likely that most children generally had access to these times of unfettered play and sociability to counter the more regimented order of their working hours. This suggests that institutional care in early modern English convents not only attended to the physical and developmental needs of the girls, but was cognizant of and attempted to cater for their emotional wellbeing. The extent to which they succeeded will be considered in the next section.

## The Experiences of Children in Early Modern Convents

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to discover the children’s own feelings about their time in convent care. Apart from the occasional letter, like that of Jenny Huddleston, their voices are principally filtered through adult accounts of their experience. Yet, through a range of sources, it is possible to glean a sense of the ups and downs of monastic schooling. Many girls spoke positively of their time in cloisters. Polly Huddleston, Jenny’s older sister, wrote to their parents in May 1785 and provided Ferdinand and Mary with snippets of convent life. Apologising for not replying sooner to her mother, she explained this was because of ‘want of time’ rather than ‘idleness or forgetfulness’. Amidst news about the weather and her aunt’s health, she described festivities surrounding the clothing (veiling) of a novice and celebrations upon the birth of a son to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. The children were allowed to watch fireworks from a convent window upon the king’s entry to Paris, and Polly anticipated being allowed to go outside to watch the queen’s expected arrival, ‘which will do me a great deal of pleasure’ (Van Hyning, 2012, pp. 305–306). Whilst the letter presents

only a snapshot of the Huddleston girls’ experience, it reveals that the school children enjoyed revelries both within and beyond the enclosure walls. The nuns did not seclude them from secular people or happenings and allowed them to enjoy the sociability occasioned by such events. The girls evidently relished the freedom from regular routines presented by these occasions and chose to focus upon them, rather than quotidian matters in their correspondence.

Another newsworthy occurrence mentioned by Polly Huddleston was the miraculous cure of a nun in the Augustinian cloister in Bruges. For some pupils spiritual events, like miracles, were an important part of their experience. Many girls exhibited precocious piety, particularly if they believed they were destined for the life of a nun. Certain children who became terminally ill in convent care were either permitted to make their religious vows upon their deathbed or they were clothed and buried in a religious habit. When Catherine Roper died in 1641, aged 14 years, she was interred in Franciscan garb, having desired to be a Poor Clare nun, although her parents had placed her as a ‘convictress’ in the Benedictine cloister in Ghent (Ward and Community, 1917, p. 30). Elizabeth Wakeman, sent to Ghent ‘to be educated’ by the nuns, originally wanted to be a Carmelite sister. She later ‘found herself strongly touch’d to be a benedicton’ and, upon falling seriously ill with a fever in 1642, persuaded the convent confessor to allow her to make her vows. He agreed, but because she was only 13 years, he inserted a clause releasing her from them should she survive. Undeterred, Elizabeth omitted the clause, and died wearing the religious habit she had so desired (Ward and Community, 1917, pp. 33–34).

Both Catherine Roper and Elizabeth Wakeman were seemingly ordained for a monastic future, but a third child who died at Ghent, making her religious profession upon her deathbed, was not. Lady Honora Burke was the daughter of the Marquis of Clanricarde. The turmoil of the 1650s in Ireland led the family into exile where Honora was placed in the Ghent convent school. She expressed her desire to become a nun to her mother, who flatly refused her permission. Honora was destined for marriage. However, in 1652, the 14-year-old fell victim to an epidemic (possibly smallpox) in Ghent. Before she died, she was granted her wish to become a Benedictine nun (Ward and Community, 1917, pp. 53–54). Obviously, these accounts of youthful religiosity and determination to make their religious vows are coloured by the genre of their source. Monastic obituaries always emphasised the deceased’s spiritual fervour. Clearly, time spent in convent schools where they were habituated to convent culture conditioned the religious vocation of girls like Catherine, Elizabeth and Honora. However, their examples reveal that life in the cloister encouraged a precocious religious devotion which comforted children confronted with serious illness, something not uncommon for young people in the early modern period, and enabled them to accept death as a positive step towards certain salvation as newly professed nuns.

Other school inmates were not so sanguine regarding their fate. Catherine Aston (known to her family as 'Keat') was professed in the Louvain Augustinian convent in 1668, after spending several years in its school. Keat's aunt, Mary (in religion, Winefrid) Thimelby, had petitioned her sister and brother-in-law to send one of their daughters to Louvain. Upon the death of her sister, her brother-in-law acquiesced, and the nun was extremely attached to her niece. However, Keat's time in the convent school was hampered by ongoing ill health and melancholy, necessitating her return to England to recover. We only have her aunt's account of this period in her life, so it is difficult to interpret the girl's feelings. However, in spite of Winefrid's delight in having her company and her dotting affection for her niece, it would seem that Keat was homesick for her father, siblings and former life in Lincolnshire, and school was not an entirely happy experience for her ([British Library](#), Add. MS 36452, fols. 76, 77; WWTN, Winefrid Thimelby, Catherine Aston). Likewise Anne Throckmorton (known as 'Nanny'), educated in the Paris Augustinian school during the 1760s, was not surrounded by kin as earlier generations of the family had been. William Cole, sent by her concerned mother in 1765, intimated that she was lonely, although she 'expressed herself very happy' being amongst other English ladies. Nanny subsequently spent time in the French convent of Port Royal to improve her command of the language, and was miserable there. When Cole called upon her there, he reported that as soon as she was alone with him 'she began to let tears fall in abundance: she said, that she hoped her Mama would not let her remain in that convent for a long time, where she had not one mortal to speak to her in her own language' (Scott, 2009, pp. 189–90). The stories of Keat Aston and Nanny Throckmorton suggest that schooling so far from home and immediate family could be an isolating and unhappy experience. Clearly, having relatives to hand in an English cloister where there were other girls in similar circumstances helped with homesickness, but this was not always enough to assuage it.

Perhaps, the most disturbing account of young children in monastic care is that of Catherine and Susan Warner. The daughters of Sir John and Lady Trevor (in religion, Teresa Clare of Jesus) Warner, the girls were placed in cloisters at the ages of 4 and 2 years, when their parents jointly decided to separate and enter religious institutions. Sir John became a Jesuit priest and Lady Trevor a Poor Clare nun. Catherine and Susan became pawns in family factionalism. Their Protestant grandfather wanted them returned to England and his care, but their mother, although not happy to have them in her care, deeming them a distraction from the spiritual life she felt compelled to follow, worried about him abducting them from a convent school. The young girls were first in the cloister in Liège, which Lady Trevor had joined. They were then placed in the care of the French Ursuline nuns in the town. When Lady Trevor decided the Sepulchrine order was not strict enough for her and joined the Poor Clares in Gravelines, her daughters were sent to

the English Benedictine convent in Ghent for a brief spell in 1667 (Scarisbricke, 1691).

Although regularly expressing her desire not to be distracted by her children, Lady Trevor evidently worried about their welfare – or at least the likelihood of their grandfather successfully abducting them. So she had Catherine and Susan brought to Gravelines to reside in her own convent, although she intended not to have anything to do with them (Scarisbricke, 1691, pp. 143–151). As a form of penance, the abbess placed them under her care. Lady Trevor was horrified but set about focussing upon her girls' religious upbringing with apparently so little demonstration of affection towards them and acknowledgment of their physical attempts to gain her attention, that onlookers were astonished. During a visit to the convent parlour, the governor's wife and a friend asked to meet them. The visitors were struck by the mother's failure to respond to her daughters' words of love and hugs. One of the women 'seeing their Mother express so little kindness and tenderness towards them, endeavor'd to Caress them, and show as much fondness towards them as she was able'. Catherine and Susan broke free and ran to Lady Trevor 'hanging about her, and speaking to her in such moving Language, as melted the Ladys heart; and moved her with Tears'. Conversely, 'Sister Clare . . . seem'd as if their words had not concern'd her, or as if she had not heard them' (Scarisbricke, 1691, pp. 188–189). If Scarisbricke is to be believed, at no point was the mother's heart moved to display any show of love for her children. In 1671, Catherine and Susan were sent as 'convictresses' to the Benedictine abbey in Dunkirk.

The account of the girls' life in convent care comes from their mother's biographer, who wanted to emphasise Lady Trevor's religious commitment to the exclusion of everything secular, including her daughters. His account of her dispassionate interaction with her children was coloured by its hagiographic intent, which was to emphasise the nun's true, and almost miraculous, calling to the religious life. He reported that amazed witnesses to the absence of maternal tenderness attributed Lady Trevor's behaviour to 'God Almighty's Grace so strangely Triumphant over the bent, and inclination, of Nature' (Scarisbricke, 1691, p. 189). Yet, although Scarisbricke uses Catherine and Susan as a hagiographic device, he nonetheless provides enough evidence of their desperate efforts to attract their mother's affection, to suggest that their experience of convent care was difficult. Although, unlike most children, they had their mother nearby, her rejection of them as a form of penance, was confusing and upsetting.

Despite the problematic nature of their formative years in religious cloisters, and most likely because of it, both sisters became nuns themselves. Catherine (in religion, Agnes) Warner was professed in the Benedictine abbey in Dunkirk in 1680, aged 20 years. Susan (in religion, Ignatia) made her vows there in 1686, aged 23 years (WWTN, Catherine Warner, Susan Warner). The girls' family circumstances and lengthy sojourns in several monastic schools

suggest that there was no alternative other than monasticism for them. The Warners' late age at profession hints at a possible reluctance on their part to be nuns, but might also reflect a difficulty in obtaining their monastic dowries, which for Susan was 500 pounds. However, their father was said to have been a great benefactor to the convent, suggesting that something other than money delayed his daughters' formal acceptance into the religious life. Catherine held senior positions within the cloister, which implies she was esteemed as pious and capable by the other nuns (WWTN, Catherine Warner). Yet, ultimately, Catherine and Susan Warner were placed in convent care and became nuns to suit their parents', rather than their own, religious desires.

The positive role of convent care in family strategy can be seen in the experiences of the seven daughters, and orphaned niece, of Sir Robert Throckmorton and Mary Yate. They were educated in the Paris Augustinian nuns' school where their aunt, Anne (Anne Frances) Throckmorton, was the novice mistress, and later prioress. Anne, the eldest daughter, was sent to the school when she was 8 years old. Barbara, the youngest, left when she was 17 years. Elizabeth commenced her schooling at the tender age of 6 years (Gibson, 2016, p. 149). Of the eight girls, only three became nuns, all in the Paris cloister where they were schooled. Elizabeth (in religion, Elizabeth Teresa Pulcheria) and Catherine (in religion, Mary Catherine) were professed in 1714, and their cousin, Anne (Anne Frances) Wollascott in 1727. Elizabeth proceeded to hold senior positions, including that of prioress for eight years in the 1750s. Catherine left the convent in about 1721, apparently for mental health reasons, and became a lay sister in the Benedictine abbey at Cambrai. Anne Wollascott was renowned for her musical prowess. Their sisters, equipped with the requisite spiritual and gentlewomanly credentials bestowed by their convent education, married into other stalwart families of the Catholic gentry (Gibson, 2016; WWTN, Elizabeth Throckmorton, Catherine Throckmorton, Anne Wollascott).

Family accounts show that all the girls had music, art and dancing lessons, in addition to more academic study. It is evident from correspondence between their aunt, Anne Frances, and their parents that their years of convent care were directed towards equipping them with the necessary pious and gentlewomanly accomplishments for marriage. But a significant factor in the Throckmorton girls' time in the school was the presence of several family members in the cloister. It is impossible to know whether the girls were happy, but they were clearly surrounded by their sisters and their aunt, who seemed to act as a kind of surrogate parent (Gibson, 2016, pp. 148–151). Anne Frances formed close attachments with her nieces, reporting when Anne left to marry in 1718, 'it has bin [*sic*] a very afflicting parting to *us and her* which nothing can soe well consolat'. She was similarly distressed when Charlotte returned to England in 1720 (Gibson, 2016, p. 150). Whilst Sir Robert may have hoped that more of his daughters would take the veil, as he experienced difficulties raising marriage dowries of roughly

5000 pounds for some of them, the fact that five married implies that Elizabeth and Catherine were not coerced into becoming nuns (Gibson, 2016, pp. 155–156). Indeed Sir Robert's niece, Anne Wollascott, had rejected a proposed marriage before deciding to take the veil (Gibson, 2016, pp. 153–154).

The experience and outcomes of convent care for several generations of Throckmorton girls, from Anne and Elizabeth in the 1670s and 1680s to lonely Nanny in the 1760s, reflect those of many other children. Certain children suffered from homesickness, some became ill and died, others enjoyed the social opportunities afforded by life in foreign cities, and a number became extremely pious and sought the life of a nun. But not all girls who spent time in convent care were that way inclined and the sources do not suggest that many were forced to take the veil against their will. Indeed, many of those schooled by the nuns, returned to England to marry. The Throckmortons were not alone in sending the next generation across the Channel for education. The names of many families recur in convent and school registers, suggesting that convent care fulfilled a significant role in Catholic child-rearing practices in the 17th and 18th centuries.

## Conclusion

The care provided to Catholic girls by the exiled convents reflected the religious, social and political imperatives of the age. The children's physical needs and developmental requirements were catered for in cloisters attuned to the emotional difficulties which might afflict young people separated from homes and kin. Yet, this occurred within an environment grounded in the experience of religious non-conformity. So the spiritual formation of pupils, which was paramount to ensure the survival of the Catholic faith, played a prominent role in schooling. Other lessons and experiences were designed to prepare them for the future, whether that might be as a nun, or as a wife and mother in England. Girls also understood that their future was intricately connected to the survival not only of their religion, but also of their family.

The outcome of convent care might have differed in terms of the children's future careers, and the experience of monastic schooling varied according to the degree of family support within the cloister and its surrounds, but the commitment of pupils to their former educative institutions is evident in either their acceptance (perhaps reluctantly) of a religious vocation, or by them sending their own children to the monasteries for a similar pious and gentlewomanly upbringing. Whilst there is evidence of coercion in some instances and stories of emotional deprivation in others, the English convents fulfilled a significant role in sustaining English Catholicism in the 17th and 18th centuries. The nuns, parents and pupils alike seemed to recognise the centrality of convent care in the survival of the Catholic minority religion. Indeed, the significance of the convents for the



spiritual future of the children educated in them can be seen in Mary Gifford, placed with the Bruges Augustinians in 1710 aged 4 years. Although she left to marry, she ‘retained so vast an affection to ye house where she had been bred’ that she sought to board with the nuns as an adult, and upon her death in 1759 ‘desired that her heart should be buried in our church’ (Durrant, 1925, p. 433). The convent continued to care for Gifford’s immortal soul, long after her school days had ended.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Some convents accepted infant and very young boys, but they did not remain beyond the age of 7 years, and in many instances male children were in a cloister’s boarding facilities with their mothers or female kin. Convent care in this paper therefore refers to girls, although I often use ‘children’ to denote their young age.
- <sup>2</sup> A recusant was any non-conformist who refused to attend Church of England services, but in common usage denotes Roman Catholics. There was a political dimension to recusancy because Catholics were believed to hold allegiance to the pope, a foreign power. Under Elizabeth I and subsequent monarchs, legislation sought to limit Catholic movement and activities to prevent potential subversive behavior.
- <sup>3</sup> Strict monastic enclosure entailed the permanent physical separation of nuns from direct contact with society beyond the convent walls. It was intended to protect the women from sexual scandal and to promote the spiritual integrity and prestige of the institution. It occurred architecturally via high walls, locked gates and grilles, but also psychologically through a process of mental separation from the world and regulation of the senses, often termed ‘mortification’ (Walker, 2003, pp. 44–54).

## References

- Anon. (1652). *A brief relation of the order and institute, of the English religious women at Liège*.
- Blazek, M., & Kraftl, P. (Eds.) (2015). *Children’s emotions in policy and practice: Mapping and making spaces of childhood*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Boswell, J. E. (1984). Expositio and Oblatio: The abandonment of children in the ancient and medieval family. *American Historical Review*, 89(1), 10–33.
- Boswell, J. (1988). *The kindness of strangers: The abandonment of children in Western Europe from late antiquity to the Renaissance*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bowden, C. (1999). “For the glory of god”: A study of the education of English catholic women in convents in Flanders and France in the first half of the seventeenth century. *Pedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, 35(Suppl. 1), 77–95. doi: 10.1080/00309230.1999.11434933.
- Bowden, C. (2013). Missing members: Selection and governance in the English convents in exile. In C. Bowden & J. E. Kelly (Eds.), *The English convents in exile, 1600–1800: Communities, culture and identity* (pp. 53–68). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- British Library. London. Add. MS 36,452. Aston Papers.
- Douai Abbey Archive. Reading, England. Box Windesheim, St. Monica’s, Louvain (W.M.L.), MS C2. *Chronicle*, 1, 1548–1837.
- Douai Abbey Archive. Reading, England. Box Windesheim, St. Monica’s, Louvain (W.M.L.), MS Qu2. R. White, Instructions for a religious superior.
- Durrant, C. S. (1925). *A link between Flemish mystics and English martyrs*. London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd.
- Ferraro, J. M. (2012). Childhood in medieval and early modern times. In P. S. Fass (Ed.), *The Routledge history of childhood in the western world* (pp. 61–77). Hoboken: Taylor & Francis. Retrieved from <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203075715.ch3>.
- Gibson, K. (2016). Marriage choice and kinship among the English Catholic elite, 1680–1730. *Journal of Family History*, 41(2), 144–164.
- Gillow, J. (Ed.) (1913). Records of the English Benedictine nuns at Cambrai (now Stanbrook), 1620–1793. In *Miscellanea VIII* (pp. 1–85). London: Catholic Record Society.
- Gillow, J., & Trappes-Lomax, R. (Eds.) (1910). *The diary of the “Blue Nuns” or Order of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady at Paris, 1658–1810*. London: Catholic Record Society.
- Hamilton, A. (Ed.). (1904). *The chronicle of the English Augustinian Canonesses Regular of the Lateran, at St Monica’s in Louvain (now at St Augustine’s Priory, Newton Abbot, Devon), 1548–1625 (Vol. 1)*. Edinburgh: Sands & Co.
- Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hills, H. (2004). *Invisible city: The architecture of devotion in seventeenth-century Neapolitan convents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levene, A. (2006). The survival prospects of European foundlings in the eighteenth century: The London foundling hospital and the spedale degli innocenti of Florence. *Popolazione e Storia*, 7(2), 61–83.
- Poor Clare Archives, Cross Bush, Arundel. (1641). Franciscan MS 6b. Book of statutes.
- Pullan, P. (1989). *Orphans and foundlings in early modern Europe*. Berkshire: University of Reading.
- Scarlsbricke, E. (1691). *The life of the Lady Warner of Parham in Suffolk. In religion call’d Sister Clare of Jesus*. London: Tho. Hales.
- Schroeder, R. J. (Ed.). (1941). *Canons and decrees of the Council of Trent*. St Louis: B. Herder Book Co.
- Schutte, A. J. (2011). *By force and fear: Taking and breaking monastic vows in early modern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Scott, G. (2009). The Throckmortons at home and abroad, 1680–1800. In P. Marshall & G. Scott (Eds.), *Catholic gentry in English Society: The Throckmortons of Coughton from reformation to emancipation* (pp. 171–211). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Smith, K. (2011). Producing governable subjects: Images of childhood old and new. *Childhood*, 19(1), 24–37.
- Sperling, J. (1999). *Convents and the body politic in late Renaissance Venice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Strasser, U. (2004). *State of virginity: Gender, religion and politics in an early modern catholic state*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Van Hyning, V. (Ed.) (2012). Letters from Bruges, Lisbon and Paris: Correspondence of the Huddleston family. In N. Hallett (Ed.), *English convents in exile, 1600–1800*. Vol. 3, *Life writing I* (pp. 295–306). London: Pickering & Chatto.
- Walker, C. (2003). *Gender and politics in early modern Europe: English convents in France and the Low Countries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ward, L. A., & Community. (1917). Obituary notices of the English Benedictine nuns of Ghent in Flanders, and at Preston, Lancashire (now at Oulton, Staffordshire), 1627–1811. In *Miscellanea XI* (pp. 1–92). London: Catholic Record Society.
- Who Were the Nuns? *A prosopographical study of the english convents in exile 1600–1800* [online biographical data set, hosted by Queen Mary University of London]. Retrieved from <http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/index.html>.

