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**DIFFERENT HABITS:**

Acknowledgements

**REPRESENTATIONS OF ANGLICAN SISTERHOODS IN MID-NINETEENTH  
CENTURY LITERATURE**

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## Summary

This thesis deals with the different ways in which Anglican Sisterhoods were portrayed in fiction and journalism, both religious and secular, in the mid-nineteenth century. It examines the influence of anti-Roman Catholic and anti-convent literature on these portrayals and considers whether there was any significant interchange between Sisterhoods and the feminist movement of the mid-nineteenth century.

The first two chapters deal with the founding of the first Sisterhoods by the Oxford Movement as active, charitable communities in the 1840s, and the type of women - predominately upper- and upper-middle class - attracted by the life and work they offered. The histories of one Sisterhood, and of two Sisters, one typical, the other not, are examined. Periodical articles of the time, while approving of the work undertaken by Sisterhoods - nursing and teaching, for example - with the poorest classes of society, tended to express doubts about Roman Catholic influences, and the suitability of the work for ladies.

Chapter three deals with a court case of 1869 in which a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy accused her convent of ill-treatment. The case attracted enormous publicity and was expected to confirm prurient speculation about convents put forward in anti-Roman Catholic propaganda and fiction, but instead raised issues about the fitness of women for communal living, celibacy and leadership. The case was used by some writers as a plea for more secular work opportunities for women.

Chapter four examines works of fiction which feature Sisterhoods, or issues connected with them, by writers of different denominations. Chapters five and six deal with the works of Charlotte Yonge and Henry Kingsley respectively. Yonge was a promoter of High Church values and supporter of Sisterhoods, while Kingsley was an ecumenicist who approved of Anglican and Roman Catholic orders equally.



## Chapter One: Anglican Sisterhoods, 'Surplus Women' and Suitable Employment

*'It may be hard to realise the difficulty of making a beginning where nothing had previously been done.'*<sup>1</sup>

The nineteenth century saw a movement by women away from the private, domestic sphere into a public domain once exclusively the territory of men. The limited nature of female education and restrictions on women's civil liberties, combined with a double standard of morality governing the behaviour of men and women meant that this movement was necessarily a slow one. In addition, social and religious prejudice against, and political antipathy to, the emergence of women into public life, were frequently manifested in masculine jealousy; in men guarding what they considered to be their prerogative, and resisting female encroachment.

By the mid-nineteenth century the patriarchal power systems which had been in place for generations were being challenged by women. Some opposition was confrontational - campaigning women, such as Josephine Butler, who fought openly against perceived male injustice. Other women - Florence Nightingale, for example - asserted themselves by dominating or creating a specific niche. Anglican Sisterhoods, often associated with Nightingale, were started from scratch in the mid-1840s as part of the Oxford Movement's resurrection of the Established Church's pre-Reformation roots, and also created a unique role for themselves. This role did not have a masculine precedent and was, moreover, one which men were to imitate in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Sisterhoods were not only pioneering in terms of women's work, but were groundbreaking, too, as autonomous female communities: autonomous in all senses, being self-governing, free from external control and symbolizing an expression of personal liberty by the women who joined them. Although the original impetus came from the male-dominated Oxford Movement, the communities themselves were outside both the network of patriarchal power which constituted the Church of England and the microcosm of that power represented by the upper-middle class family unit.

Past analyses of Sisterhoods have attempted to place them within their social context and to assess how far they could be deemed to be part of the feminist movement of the nineteenth century. Because their communities were on the whole free from direct male control, and because they offered women a viable and voluntary alternative to

marriage or passive spinsterhood, Michael Hill considers that Sisters had an ‘incipiently feminist conception of the role of women’.<sup>2</sup> Martha Vicinus also sees them as an alternative to the life choices for women traditionally offered by society, and therefore as a transitional stage in the development of feminism.<sup>3</sup> John Shelton Reed thinks that the development of Sisterhoods ‘can be seen as part of a larger “silent rebellion”’ against deeply entrenched traditional assumptions about women’s roles and functions.<sup>4</sup> However, he also considers that although Anglo-Catholic communities may have embodied some of the values of Victorian feminism they did so in such an individual, not to say limited way, incorporating much of the High Church’s own patriarchal attitudes, that ‘it might be better to regard it as an *alternative* to feminism’.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being simply an alternative to feminism, there does seem to have been some crossover between the feminist movement and Sisterhoods, albeit very gradual. The work undertaken by Sisters was groundbreaking in terms of contemporary notions of ladies’ capabilities, and opened the way for similar opportunities in the secular world. The refusal of Sisterhoods to give up their work in the face of disapproval from their peers, and their continuous, if steady, expansion throughout the century shed a new light on women’s potential for working outside the home .

### **The female monastic tradition in England and Wales**

The newly-founded Anglican Sisterhoods of the mid-nineteenth century contradicted sensationalist British expectations of nuns, coloured by fictional accounts of the Inquisition<sup>6</sup>, and Gothic stories of convent life in Italy and Spain.<sup>7</sup> There were no English models to base expectations on as, following the Dissolution of religious houses in the mid-sixteenth century, monastic life in England had effectively disappeared from public view. For the next three hundred years organised monasticism within the Church of England (as opposed to recusant communities) ceased to exist. When it began to be re-established it was active female communities which led the way, as A M Allchin has observed, in a reversal of the accepted development of Christian monasticism which was contemplation first, activity second; men first, women second.<sup>8</sup> The religious life re-emerged as an independent female movement which, if it was not entirely woman-led, was certainly woman-centred. Moreover, the movement was established by a class of women regarded as ‘redundant’ in the mid-nineteenth century, who went on to revise and



re-create the concept of the religious life for women in England. They were also part, willingly or unwillingly, of a growing movement within the same class of women seeking to control their own lives and looking for interest and employment outside the domestic sphere. To do this they had to confront both Victorian expectations of female behaviour and contemporary perceptions of convent life.

During the three hundred years after the Dissolution the idea of monasticism, particularly for women, was not forgotten. Indeed, very soon after the Dissolution the Bishop of Armagh, John Bramhall (1594-1663), who doubted the both the legality and benefit of getting rid of religious houses, declared, 'I do not see why monasteries might not agree well enough with reformed devotion.'<sup>9</sup>

The idea of a Protestant religious community, although it was hardly monastic, was realised in 1626 when Nicholas Ferrar moved his large extended family to the manor house of Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire. Ferrar founded a religious community based on the observance of the canonical hours, the continuous recitation of the psalms, and the notion of serving and educating the poor people of the surrounding district. The community lasted until the Civil War when the remaining members (Ferrar was already dead) were forced to flee the country. The house and chapel were ransacked by Puritan soldiers in 1646. Just as the 'martyred' Charles I became something of an icon for Anglo-Catholics, Little Gidding became for some the model of a religious community.<sup>10</sup> It held particular importance for the emergent Anglican Sisterhoods of the nineteenth century as the women of Little Gidding, especially Ferrar's mother, played major roles in the formation and running of the community.

The later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a reappraisal of the value of religious communities for women, albeit from a Protestant perspective.<sup>11</sup> The idea of such communities for men seems to have been less discussed, although in 1659 John Evelyn proposed an establishment of scholarly men 'somewhat after the manner of the Carthusians'.<sup>12</sup>

Mary Astell's A Serious Proposal to the Ladies by a Lover of her Sex (1694) put forward plans for a place of 'Religious Retirement' where ladies were to spend time in study as well as prayer and where girls of the higher class and the daughters of impoverished gentlemen could be educated. Lettice, Lady Falkland, who died in the Civil War, had hoped to found houses for 'the education of young gentlewomen and the retirement of widows [...] hoping thereby that learning and religion might flourish more in

her own sex than heretofore, having such opportunities to serve the Lord without distraction.<sup>13</sup> The idea of Protestant communities of unmarried women, loosely based on Roman Catholic convents, was also mooted by Robert Burton<sup>14</sup>, John Bellers<sup>15</sup>, Thomas Brecon<sup>16</sup>, and Samuel Wesley<sup>17</sup>. The hero of Samuel Richardson's The History of Sir Charles Grandison, Bart. (1754) declared, 'We want to see established in every country Protestant Nunneries, in which single women, of small or no fortunes, might live with all manner of freedom, under such regulations as it would be a disgrace for a modest or good woman not to comply with, were she absolutely on her own hands; and to be allowed to quit it whenever they pleased.'<sup>18</sup>

The French Revolution forced many Roman Catholic religious communities to flee France and, in common with secular refugees, some found their way to England thereby re-establishing the monastic tradition there.<sup>19</sup> By 1794 there were some 14 female communities, and at least two male, established in England.<sup>20</sup> These were all enclosed orders which settled in rural areas and which seem to have been regarded as political refugees rather than religious invaders. The presence of Roman Catholic religious communities was now a fact, but it was to take almost another half-century before the Church of England initiated its own form of monasticism.

The 1820s saw several abortive proposals for Protestant orders. Blackwood's Magazine in 1825 published an article by a Dr Gooch which described the work of Belgian *Béguines* and suggested the foundation of a similar order, dedicated to nursing, in England. In 1826 the Reverend Alex R C Dallas published a letter to the Bishop of London, Protestant Sisters of Charity which again proposed a nursing order along the lines of French *Soeurs de la Charité*. However, it is Robert Southey's call for the creation of Protestant Sisters of Charity in Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society (1829), a series of imaginary conversations with Sir Thomas More, which seems to have been the most influential, and has certainly been the most-quoted:

Why have you then no Beguines, no Sisters of Charity? Why in the most needful, the most merciful form that charity can take, have you not yet followed the example of the French and the Netherlanders? No Vincent de Paul has been heard in your pulpits; no Louise le Gras has appeared among the daughters of Great Britain! Piety has not found its way into your prisons; your hospitals are imploring it in vain; nothing is wanting in them but religious charity, and oh what a want is that.<sup>21</sup>



However, as Michael Hill points out, Southey's concern was for orders of women engaged in nursing or other practical charitable works.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, he expressed deep suspicion, and not a little contemporary prejudice, about enclosed and contemplative orders:

Nunneries are useful as Bedlams, which crazy women choose for themselves; but they are not Bedlams; they are Prisons; and it is not necessary that women should possess exalted sentiments, for them to be very miserable in confinement.<sup>23</sup>

The possibility of re-introducing the religious life into the English Church had been discussed amongst the leaders of the Oxford Movement at the beginning of the 1840s, most notably by Pusey, Newman, Keble and Hook.<sup>24</sup> Although they cited the Catholic Fathers, particularly St Augustine and St Jerome, as authority for the creation of religious orders, the interpretation of this authority was disputed by opponents to the Movement, sparking an argument which was not resolved until the end of the century.<sup>25</sup> It was also noted by knowledgeable observers that Pusey's Rule for the first Sisterhood was based on that of Counter-Reformation (and therefore post-Tridentine) Roman orders which were potentially dangerously imitative of Roman Catholic practices.<sup>26</sup>

Following Southey's death in 1843, Lord John Manners suggested in a letter to the Morning Post that, given Southey's persistent advocacy that the Church of England adopt a system of *Béguinages*, the establishment of a Sisterhood of Mercy would be an appropriate memorial to the late Poet Laureate. Prominent High Church figures involved in the establishment of the first Sisterhood included not only Manners, but Dr Pusey and William Gladstone. Before taking any positive steps Manners consulted Bishop Blomfield of London, who, after referring to the Archbishop of Canterbury, gave what Manners took to be qualified approval for the scheme to proceed.

Gladstone composed a circular about the proposed Sisterhood which was sent to a select number of interested people. He described the scheme as:

[...] the establishment and permanent maintenance of a Sisterhood living under a religious Rule, and engaged in relieving distress wherever it may be found.

The works of mercy contemplated are such as

1. Visiting the poor or the sick at their own houses.
2. Visiting hospitals, workhouses, or prisons.
3. Feeding, clothing, and instructing destitute children.
4. Giving shelter to distressed women of good character.

### 5. Assisting in the burial of the dead.<sup>27</sup>

Gladstone went on to say that although the founders were satisfied that such a Sisterhood was not in opposition to the principles of the Church of England, they had been given no official sanction by Church leaders. Subscriptions towards the upkeep of the Sisterhood could be paid into an account at Drummond's Bank.

One of the founders of this first Sisterhood was the Reverend W Dodsworth, of Christ Church, Albany Street, near Regent's Park, who had agreed to accept the community into his parish. Correspondingly, in 1845 a house was rented at Park Village West for its use and five Sisters moved in. Of the five, one was the daughter of a country clergyman and another the daughter of the Bishop of Edinburgh - an early indication of the class and type of women such communities were to attract. Pusey had hoped that Marian Hughes, who had dedicated herself to a form of the religious life under his supervision some years before, would be able to join as Superior. Miss Hughes, however, had to refuse on the grounds that her duty to an old and sick parent precluded her from accepting. On the death of her parents four years later she founded the Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity.<sup>28</sup> Another putative member was Charlotte Yonge's friend, Marianne Moore, who was advised by Keble to decline on the grounds of delicate health.<sup>29</sup> Although, according to the Rule of the Sisterhood, and at the wish of the Bishop of London, vows were not to be taken, some Sisters did so privately to Pusey.

The Sisters immediately undertook work in the neighbouring slum areas of Camden Town and Somers Town, one of their first tasks being to open a Ragged School for the very poorest children. They combined their work with twice-daily church attendance, and with the recitation of the canonical hours, a pattern which was to be repeated by the Sisterhoods which rapidly sprang up in the wake of Park Village West.

From the establishment of this first community the Sisterhood movement mushroomed until there were some 80 communities in mainland Britain by 1900. This rapid development was a tribute not simply to the Oxford Movement, but also to a growing determination amongst women to work and control their own lives. The attraction for women of the religious life in particular, and the Oxford Movement generally has been well documented, both by contemporary observers and by religious historians. Susan Mumm notes that even lay Anglo-Catholicism offered almost a full time occupation for women with daily services, the duty of helping the poor, and private



prayer and meditation.<sup>30</sup> However, a contemporary observer, Penelope Holland, considered that 'church-going supplies an imaginary duty to fill up hours for which girls can really find no occupation'.<sup>31</sup> John Shelton Reed records that critics of the Movement considered that its attraction for women lay partly in the unbounded opportunities for virtuoso needlework that Ritualist vestments and church furnishings offered ladies seeking to fill their leisure hours.<sup>32</sup>

Although the early Sisterhoods tended to be discreet and shunned publicity, they still attracted public and media attention, and initial reaction to their formation was, generally speaking, in line with reaction to the Oxford Movement as a whole. Not all those within the Movement favoured the re-introduction of religious orders, but most of the opponents of Sisterhoods came from the Evangelical extreme of the Established Church, and from Non-Conformists. Those critics who were most openly hostile were those who perceived there to be a very fine distinction, if any at all, between Anglo-Catholicism and Roman Catholicism, and between Anglican Sisterhoods and Roman Catholic convents. This close association meant that Anglo-Catholicism suffered to a large extent from the anti-Roman Catholic feeling that was so prevalent in mid-nineteenth century England. Anglican Sisterhoods were, initially at least, regarded with the same prejudice as Roman Catholic convents. Anti-Roman Catholic feeling was based on several factors here outlined by G F A Best: 'serious theological objections to Rome' particularly to the role of the priest as mediator between God and man; a religious-political conception of 'Popery' as a threat to national liberty; moral objections to Roman Catholicism as 'inimical to truth', and the 'unnaturalness' of celibacy.<sup>33</sup> Anti-convent prejudice, Best suggests, was based on a combination of a distrust of celibacy, ignorance of convent life and Protestant prurience.<sup>34</sup> Anti-Catholic awareness was promoted through a variety of media including public meetings organised by ultra-Protestant societies, such as the Protestant Truth Society, and the pamphlets published and distributed by these societies, most notably in the 1850s.<sup>35</sup> Anti-Roman Catholic fiction was fuelled by these developments but could also be traced back to the Gothic novels of the early nineteenth century. G A Paz has noted the strong sexual element particularly in anti-convent fiction (which he regards as a sub-genre) and attributes the success of this fiction to the fact that Roman Catholicism proved itself to be 'an effective vehicle for sex and death'.<sup>36</sup>

Although the early Anglican communities were neither contemplative nor enclosed, it was feared that they embraced the rumoured worst excesses of Roman orders and much was made of foolish women seduced into religion, and worse, by romantic ideas of convents, mediaevalism and Gothic architecture and then being unable to escape. Consequently, Priscilla Sellon's community at Devonport was the subject of a sustained pamphlet war between Miss Sellon and antagonistic clergy, and the funeral of a member of J M Neale's community at East Grinstead was marred by rioting partly instigated by the father of the deceased, who accused the community of engineering her death so that it could benefit from her will. Other Sisterhoods also met with distrust and opposition, based on anti-Roman Catholic propaganda, when they first started work, but this tended to dissipate once they had established themselves. Reed claims that little criticism was made of the work done by Sisterhoods because its value was universally acknowledged.<sup>37</sup> This, I think, is a rather sweeping generalization and ignores contemporary discussions of the efficacy of indiscriminate charity, and class-based objections to the work carried out by Sisterhoods.

In reality, the promise of being able to do useful work outside the confines of the domestic sphere was often as much an inducement to profession as the religious life, and for the ambitious there was the opportunity of exercising powers of organisation and leadership.<sup>38</sup> Most Sisterhoods were established by a founding Mother Superior, and much of the initial mistrust of Sisterhoods was due to the fact that they were self-governing female communities. Because the Church of England spent most of the second half of the nineteenth century deciding whether or not to recognise Sisterhoods, they were maverick organisations outside the control of the Church.<sup>39</sup> Broadly speaking, any woman with the necessary will and determination, and financial back-up, could start a Sisterhood wherever she wanted, with or without the permission of the incumbent of the parish in which she chose to start. Sisterhoods were not subject to diocesan control, and although the approval and support of the appropriate bishop was often sought, it was not always granted. Whereas Roman Catholic communities were perceived (not always accurately) to be subject to a masculine hierarchy starting with their priest and ending with the Pope, Anglican communities could, if they wished, be entirely autonomous. When Emily Ayckbowm's Sisters of the Church came into disagreement with the Archbishop of Canterbury at the end of the century, they dropped him (and all other men, including their Chairman, Lord Nelson) from their list of patrons. The disagreement had



arisen from the Sisters' refusal to accept the Bishop of London as Visitor, claiming that their mission was 'Church-wide', rather than diocesan.<sup>40</sup>

Priscilla Lydia Sellon also alienated her bishop, Phillpotts of Exeter, having initially received his whole-hearted support. Miss Sellon responded to a public appeal from the bishop in 1848 for help in working with the poor in Devonport and the surrounding area. Within two years her community opened schools for children, an orphanage, a sailors' mission, a training school for domestic servants and had provided the principal nurses in the area during the cholera epidemic of 1849. In 1854 five Sisters went to Scutari with Florence Nightingale. The basis of Miss Sellon's falling-out with Bishop Phillpotts seems to have lain in her close and mutually reliant friendship with Dr Pusey and her increasing insistence on discipline and obedience within her community combined with extremes of ascetism which veered dangerously close, it seemed in the 1850s, to Rome. In 1852 Dr Phillpotts withdrew his support from the Devonport Community. Miss Sellon's relationship with the bishop, and indeed with anybody who questioned the running of her community, was exacerbated by her perception of the deference due to her as the daughter of a wealthy admiral.<sup>41</sup>

Other Sisterhoods, notably the communities of St John the Baptist, Clewer, St Mary the Virgin, Wantage, and St Margaret, East Grinstead, were founded by clergymen with decided views on the purpose of Sisterhoods, and who played a leading role in the direction of the communities. The fact that a community was male-led or influenced did not, however, guarantee diocesan acceptance. Whereas the Reverend T T Carter, at Clewer, and Canon Butler, at Wantage, had the (sometimes ambivalent) support of Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford, John Mason Neale at East Grinstead at various times faced opposition not only from Bishop Gilbert of Chichester, but also from the vicar in whose parish the community was based.<sup>42</sup>

Some Sisterhoods included a chaplain or spiritual director, a position which seems to have been almost exclusively spiritual and not concerned with the day-to-day running of the community. The ability of women to co-exist peacefully and work efficiently in autonomous communities and to manage their own lives without male guidance was an issue raised from time to time in connection with Sisterhoods and convents, with much masculine scepticism expressed with regard to female capability.

The work carried out by Sisterhoods was an extension of the 'good works' practised by women of the upper- and upper-middle classes who accepted the Oxford

Movement's scripturally-defined emphasis on helping the poor, and the social standing of community members reflected this. The majority of Sisterhoods adopted the Roman two-tier system of membership with choir and lay Sisters. The latter were generally from the class that supplied the 'better' type of domestic servant, and the former were from the upper and upper-middle classes. Mumm has estimated that over 73% of professed choir Sisters were from the professional classes, 21% from the aristocracy and gentry, with the mercantile classes making up the balance, and that lay Sisters were from servant and artisan backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> The notable exception to this system was St Mary the Virgin, Wantage, where all Sisters were regarded as equal, and where the second Superior (Butler's first choice went over to Rome) and formative influence on the community, Harriet Day, was the daughter of a farmer.

Choir Sisters, generally, but not in all communities, made a one-off donation on profession or a yearly payment to their community, whereas this was not required of lay Sisters.<sup>44</sup> In two-tier Sisterhoods the duties of lay Sisters seem to have been domestic, leaving the choir Sisters free to carry out the community's work, but each community seems to have differed in this respect.

The work of Sisterhoods initially centred around women and children of the poorest classes, with the most effective work being carried out in urban areas, frequently in conjunction with Ritualist 'slum priests'.<sup>45</sup> The Sisters were nurses, and sometimes midwives, they opened specialist hospitals for children and convalescent homes, and provided training for nurses. They trained girls at first for domestic service and then, as the century progressed, for other careers as they became open to women. They set up reformatories for prostitutes, orphanages and also schools, both for poor children and for the middle classes - in some cases the latter financed the former. Some Sisterhoods organised day nurseries for working mothers and ran clubs and libraries for boys and men.

The development of work at St Margaret's, East Grinstead, is typical of many Sisterhoods. In 1855, soon after he had established the community (which was in an area of considerable rural poverty) Neale arranged for his first Sisters to have two months' training at the Westminster Hospital. On their return to East Grinstead the Sisters were sent out to nurse the sick in conditions of appalling squalor, living with the families of their patients in cottages which Neale described as hovels, 'Such extremes of wretchedness I never saw, but in Portugal'. Neale then sent out circulars offering the Sisters' services to 'clergy and gentry' within a 25-mile radius of East Grinstead. In



consequence, the Sisters were then permanently on call to nurse the sick in their own homes, and also to take charge of temporary hospitals during epidemics, including running the military hospital at Aldershot during a scarlet fever epidemic in 1865.<sup>46</sup>

In 1857, the Sisters opened an orphanage and a day school for poor children. In 1858, a friend of Neale's working in Soho asked for two Sisters to help in his parish, this led indirectly to the founding of the Newport Market Refuge for the homeless in 1863. In 1862, the community opened St Agnes School for the daughters of professional men, and in the same year, a House of Refuge (for 'fallen women') conveniently situated near the military camp at Aldershot, and a night school for railway workers. A school of embroidery was established in London in 1875 where women and girls were trained in needlework to a high standard, and vestments, altar linens, frontals, banners and the like were made and exported worldwide.<sup>47</sup> St Catherine's Home for Advanced Cases of Consumption was started at Ventnor in 1879. In addition, the Sisterhood had from the beginning been active in East Grinstead, establishing a soup kitchen for vagrants, the St Michael's Guild for girls (there was another branch in Soho), the night school, Sunday schools, and forming close links with the Mothers' Union. Over the century, the Sisterhood also opened Affiliated Houses and Missions in Boston, Massachusetts, Ceylon, and South Africa, as well as in poor urban areas of England, Wales and Scotland.

The above schedule might suggest a cast of thousands, but in fact Mumm records only 86 professions at St Margaret's in the first 25 years after founding in 1855, although these Sisters would have been supported by novices, postulants and by Associates (who were first received in 1858).<sup>48</sup> Anson refers to two sisters teaching 100 children in Soho.<sup>49</sup> The Society's diary for the 1860s and '70s records a constant movement of Sisters to and from nursing jobs and from their various operational bases, and also the necessity of frequent 'begging tours' by the Superior, Mother Ann, to raise funds for the community's work.

That the Sisters were required to work hard, under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions is not atypical of Sisterhood work. In addition, and as a contrast to their work in the secular community, they were leaders in the reintroduction and development of ritual. Reed makes the point that, whereas the reintroduction of ritual by High Church priests was often opposed by congregations in parish churches, Sisterhood chapels and oratories were free to do as they pleased, and with no liturgical guidelines from the ecclesiastical authorities, could devise their own services.<sup>50</sup>

## **‘Surplus Women’**

In order to understand the attraction of a celibate, hardworking lifestyle in an age when matrimony and leisure were accepted as the ambition, if not the right, of every woman who considered herself a lady, it is necessary to examine the status of unmarried women in the mid-nineteenth century.

The fact that a proportion of the female population would not marry was nothing new in the mid-nineteenth century, nor was it a novelty that this should be regarded as a difficulty. Lawrence Stone has suggested that the problem of surplus women can be traced back to the dissolution of the monasteries when a substantial number of women, previously in convents, became available for marriage, thus upsetting a harmonious balance and creating a supply for which there was no demand.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, the British tradition of primogeniture required that the eldest son of a family should marry a woman of equivalent social or financial status to protect or increase the family property, in turn producing an heir who would repeat the process. Younger sons were on the whole left to fend for themselves in terms of income and marriage, the latter frequently being dependent on the former because of a desire to maintain the standard of living and social status to which they had been born. Hence it became desirable to marry a woman with money, or to delay marriage until it was affordable within predefined economic limits. The perceived need to pass on family property in its entirety also restricted the provision of marriage portions for daughters, particularly for the women who might have been candidates for convents prior to their dissolution. Moreover, the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw increased numbers of the landowning classes declining to marry. The percentage of unmarried women therefore rose from 10% in the sixteenth century to nearly 25% by 1799.

In the mid-nineteenth century, men who delayed marriage, or refused to marry, came under public scrutiny. It was, after all, divinely directed that they should.<sup>52</sup> Criticism was directed particularly at men who put off marriage because as family men



they could not maintain the same life style they enjoyed as bachelors. It was also likely that they would not be able to support a wife of their own social standing to the level she might expect. It was an issue addressed by Frances Power Cobbe in an article in Fraser's (1862) where she poured scorn on what she perceived as the notion of purchasing a wife, and of a mercenary and status-obsessed outlook on marriage, 'What have we assumed a wife to be? A wholly passive medium of expenditure, like a conservatory or a pack of hounds?'.<sup>53</sup>

The 1851 census estimated that there were over 365,000 unmarried women in the British Isles, and this figure seems to have sparked off a debate about the condition of unmarried women which continued over the next couple of decades.<sup>54</sup> Unmarried women came to be regarded as 'surplus' and as somehow constituting a national problem. The amount of media attention the 'problem' attracted, however, would suggest, wrongly, that this was a new phenomenon. Rather, public interest was aroused as much by increased literacy and the growth of the periodical press and the forum it provided for discussion, and by the fact that increasing numbers of women began to write for the periodicals. Eminent feminist and female writers who discussed the 'surplus women problem', albeit often from differing angles, included Frances Power Cobbe, Jessie Boucherett, Anna Jameson, Eliza Lynn Linton, and Dinah Mulock Craik.

The 'problem' was also addressed by men. W R Greg saw the fact that so many women were leading 'independent and incomplete lives' as 'indicative of an unwholesome social state [...] both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong'. He went on to estimate that unmarried women were 'proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes'.<sup>55</sup> These women 'in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own'. The article divided middle and upper class women into various 'abnormal existences': those who work as governesses, those with just enough income to live on, but no occupation, those without financial worries but 'who beg for occupation', and those in the 'highest ranks of all' who are committed to an unremitting and unsatisfying 'dreary' round of pleasure.<sup>56</sup> Greg maintained that 'marriage, the union of one man with one woman, is unmistakably indicated as the despotic law of life', and that although a very small number of women were naturally suited to celibacy, it was an unnatural and potentially dangerous state. Lack of occupation and 'none to love, cherish

and obey' caused the single woman to deteriorate, with narrowing mind and withering heart.

An article by Dora Greenwell in the North British Review of 1862 claimed that, 'No woman, we venture to say, is single from choice', and 'A single woman! Is there not something plaintive in the two words standing together? the more so, if they are viewed in connection with a certain verse in Genesis: "And the Lord God said, It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him an help meet for him."<sup>57</sup> All women would like to be married and those who were not were in contradiction of scripture; were existing, willingly or unwillingly, contrary to the law of God. In both Greg and Greenwell's articles emphasis is put on woman's role as man's helper, as subordinate to him, and as living an undirected and indeterminate life without masculine direction and the fulfilment of motherhood.

Frances Power Cobbe, writing in Fraser's in 1862, put a different perspective on single women. Claiming that the social prejudices that formerly shackled unmarried women of the upper classes to a dreary and monotonous existence were now more or less dissipated, she said that the contemporary 'old maid' is 'an exceedingly cheery personage, running about untrammelled by husband or children'.<sup>58</sup> Cobbe's single woman was as willing and able to climb Vesuvius or the Pyramids as she was to engage herself with school and hospital work. The lonely and miserable old age predicted by the authors of the previous two articles was denied by Cobbe who pointed out that women have an ability denied to men to make true and lasting friendships with their own sex, and that women have the capacity to live together and share each other's lives. While not denying that marriage 'was manifestly the Creator's plan for humanity', Cobbe pointed out that marriage was not always the ideal condition it was supposed to be, and that the English gentleman (regrettably) could be just as inclined to domestic violence as his costermonger counterpart.<sup>59</sup>

Anne Ritchie took the same line in the Cornhill, in 1861, professing little sympathy with unmarried women who complained about a lonely and unfulfilled existence. 'What possible reason can there be to prevent unmarried, any more than married people from being happy (or unhappy) according to their circumstances - from enjoying other pleasures more lively than the griefs and sorrows of their neighbours?'.<sup>60</sup> Ritchie asked if unmarried women were excluded from theatres, parks, concerts, dinner parties, etc., and made a long list of spinsters' achievements, including climbing craters,



taming horses and travelling wherever they please. Like Cobbe, she pointed out that 'if Miss A. considers herself less fortunate than Mrs B., who has an adoring husband always at home, and 10,000/ a year, she certainly does not envy poor Mrs C., who has to fly to Sir Cresswell Cresswell to get rid of a "life companion" who beats her with his umbrella'.<sup>61</sup>

Both Cobbe and Ritchie assumed that their unmarried women would have an income adequate to finance extensive leisure and charitable activities (although Ritchie went on to discuss women's work). However, the problem of unmarried women was not just perceived as moral (the unnaturalness of celibacy) and social (how they occupied their time) but also economic. A major factor of the 'surplus woman problem', particularly with reference to middle and upper class women, was that they frequently did not have enough income to support themselves, and were hopelessly ill-equipped to earn their own living. Lack of income seems to have been due to inadequate provision for daughters by parents who assumed they would marry, parental financial failure, or ageing parents with a diminished income relying on daughters to support them. A common assumption seems to have been that an unmarried woman would make herself useful within her family, indeed, had a duty to do so, in return for her male relatives providing a home or assuming financial responsibility for her. The inability of these women to earn their living was due both to the inadequacy of their education and to contemporary conceptions about the status of ladies, particularly the fear of losing caste by accepting employment inappropriate to their class.

According to Dinah Mulock Craik,

The great bulk of unmarried women are a very helpless race, either hampered with duties, or seeking feebly for duties that do not come; miserably overworked, or disgracefully idle; piteously dependent on male relations, or else angrily vituperating the opposite sex for their denied rights or perhaps not undeserved wrongs.<sup>62</sup>

Craik, a married woman with a successful career, seems to be unduly antagonistic towards what she considers to be underachieving unmarried women, who either allow themselves to be shamefully exploited (either by employers or by their families), or who have no occupation at all, whether by choice or not. They were perhaps hardly to blame for the piteous dependence on male relatives given the ethic prevalent in the nineteenth century that it was shameful for a man of education and sufficient wealth to let his female

relatives work. This included not only working outside the home for money, but also undertaking any but the very lightest of physical tasks within the home.

A primary function of the wives and daughters of middle and upper class men was to act as an indicator of patriarchal power and success, becoming passive vehicles for the display of the family's wealth and status partly by the amount of leisure time they commanded and by elaborate dress, changed several times a day, which (depending on the fashion) controlled posture and restricted movement.<sup>63</sup> Wanda F Neff considers that the rise of 'the idle woman' started with the Restoration when upper class women became increasingly involved in fashionable court life, and traces its social downward progress through the country squirearchy until, by the eighteenth century, 'the triumph of the useless woman was complete'.<sup>64</sup> The development of a national marriage market for the middle and upper classes can also be traced during this period, from regional fairs and assemblies in the seventeenth century to the larger events (balls, assemblies, etc.) of the eighteenth century which eventually formed the London 'Season'.

In the nineteenth century the perception of the idle woman as denoting social status had filtered down to the rising bourgeoisie, so that more and more women were left without occupation, even within the home. At the same time, the unregulated state of financial institutions and fluctuating trade and agricultural conditions offered no guarantee of secure investments, so that a family brought up in the expectation of unearned income, with the social caste thus conferred, might suddenly find themselves forced to seek employment.<sup>65</sup>

Single women placed in this position, the daughters, sisters and widows of the unfortunate or incompetent investors - those whom Craik considered 'piteously dependent on male relations' - were thrown on a labour market, for which they were totally unprepared by inadequate education, to become in all probability (if they could find employment), Craik's 'miserably overworked'.

The inadequacy of female education generally, and the lack of preparation it provided for life outside the domestic sphere in particular, became the object of much criticism. Whereas boys were educated to take their place in the world, girls were prepared for a life of leisure. The differences were defined by Elizabeth Sewell in her Principles of Education:



The aim of education is to fit children for the position of life which they are hereafter to occupy. Boys are to be sent out into the world, to buffet with its temptations, to mingle with the bad and good, to govern and direct [...] Girls are to dwell in quiet homes, to exercise a noiseless influence, to be submissive and retiring.<sup>66</sup>

Sewell believed that home education under the supervisory eye of their parents was preferable to boarding school for girls. Whether they were educated at home or at school, by the 1860s the type of education offered for girls was attracting criticism, most particularly in relation to the priority frequently accorded to 'accomplishments' over knowledge. These accomplishments (for example, music, dancing, drawing, possibly French) were considered necessary primarily to attract husbands, but also to fill up leisure hours and to entertain family and guests. An article in The Quarterly Review (1869) reflected a growing opinion, not only regarding the paucity of such an education, but also of the way in which it was taught:

The sacrifice of everything else to 'accomplishments' and the pitiful character of those 'accomplishments' when acquired - the poverty of the French, the worthlessness of the music, the absence of any training and strengthening of the mind, the miserably deficient school-books, the waste of time and energy in consequence of bad methods of teaching, and the inefficiency of the teachers.<sup>67</sup>

It was not an education that placed any emphasis on extensive knowledge or depth of learning. Broadly speaking, the purpose of upper and middle class female education was to acquire a little of everything, but nothing in any real detail. The end result was a veneer of education, summarized by Frances Power Cobbe who considered that 'a better system [than that at her school] could hardly have been devised to attain the maximum of cost and labour and the minimum of solid results.'<sup>68</sup>

Apart from the fact that girls were considered to need only sufficient education to allow them to attract husbands, run a household and raise children, their role in the domestic sphere was not perceived as requiring any exercise of intellect. Herbert Spencer was probably not alone in thinking that, 'Men care little for erudition in women; but very much for physical beauty'.<sup>69</sup> In addition, women were not considered capable of the same depth of understanding as men. Henry Maudsley thought that men and women were as unlike mentally as they were physically:

To aim, by means of education and pursuits in life, to assimilate the female to the male mind, might well be pronounced as unwise and fruitless a labour as it would be to strive to assimilate the female to the male body by means of the same kind of physical training and by the adoption of the same pursuits.<sup>70</sup>

George Eliot summed up this perception of women's abilities in The Mill on the Floss (1860). Maggie Tulliver asks her brother's teacher if she could learn the same lessons as him:

"Mr Stelling," she said, that evening when they were in the drawing room, "couldn't I do Euclid and all Tom's lessons, if you were to teach me instead of him?"

"No, you couldn't," said Tom, indignantly. "Girls can't do Euclid: can they sir?"

"They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay," said Mr Stelling. "They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow."<sup>71</sup>

The notion of women's intellectual inferiority was supported by Dora Greenwell in her 1862 North British Review article. There was no point in arguing that women have mental equality with men: it is 'an essential radical, organic difference, which makes her fail where he excels, and excel where he would fail most greatly. It is not given to woman to see, to grasp, things in their wholeness, to behold them in affinity, in relation.'<sup>72</sup>

Women were naturally passive and receptive, their role was to 'foster, to develop', rather than to instigate, invent or create.

Elizabeth Sewell emphasised the dangers of physical breakdown and permanently impaired health if girls were encouraged to study to the same standard as boys,<sup>73</sup> and Herbert Spencer warned parents against over-educating their daughters:

Educate as highly as possible - the higher the better- providing no bodily injury is entailed [...] But to educate in such a manner, or to such an extent, as to produce physical degeneracy, is to defeat the chief end for which the toil and cost and anxiety are submitted to. By subjecting their daughters to this high-pressure system, parents frequently ruin their prospects in life. Besides inflicting on them enfeebled health, with all its pains and disabilities and gloom; they not unfrequently doom them to celibacy.<sup>74</sup>

Celibacy, of course, brought with it its own peculiar dangers. In the mid-nineteenth century a belief existed amongst doctors (effectively an exclusively male profession) that



the uterus was the dominant factor in women's physiology. If the uterus's natural functions were not exercised there were dire consequences for a woman's health. Unmarried women were believed to be subject to a number of complaints, both physical and mental, which were various manifestations of hysteria resulting from pent up sexual desire - acute bronchitis, peritonitis, religious hysteria or even kleptomania, for example.<sup>75</sup>

From a twenty-first century perspective the outlook for upper and middle-class girls was rather bleak. If they did not marry they had to acknowledge not only their failure in their one great duty in life but also the possibility of an impoverished or overworked middle-age, and in any case could expect to suffer from the supposed vagaries of their uteruses. If they did marry they were equally subject to the vagaries of their husbands. They were generally perceived to be physiologically and psychologically different, if not inferior, to men and to be incapable of the same physical and intellectual attainments. They generally received what Penelope Holland described as a 'desultory education' which ill-equipped them for dealing with the world outside the domestic sphere.<sup>76</sup> It was what Mrs Augusta Webster called 'educating our daughters to the occupation of waiting till somebody came for them, and educating them to no other occupation.'<sup>77</sup>

Penelope Holland's Macmillan's article serves as an illustration of the pressure to marry on upper-middle and upper-class young women, and of the lack of alternatives open to them. For many, their existence centred around the London Season which served as a clearing house and introduction bureau for the single and well-connected. Exactly how many young women were involved in the round of entertainments that constituted a national marriage market is difficult to judge. By the end of the century it was estimated that some 4000 families were actively participating. The Queen, however, ran a regular column, 'The Upper 10,000 At Home and Abroad', whereas the Court Guide for 1900 listed 30,000 families who could potentially take part.<sup>78</sup> The Season traditionally ran from May to August and was crammed with events (the Royal Academy preview, by private invitation, for example). In Lady Dorothy Neville's first season in 1849 she went to 50 balls, 60 parties, 30 dinners and 25 breakfasts, all in the space of some 90 days - a programme necessitating a large and varied wardrobe.<sup>79</sup>

The Season and attendant marriage market provided a rich source of material for writers fascinated with the lives of the upper classes, who were ideally supposed to set a moral example to the rest of the country. Girls who were perceived to pursue young men



too enthusiastically were reviled as husband hunters, although, as Augusta Webster pointed out, they were damned if they did, and damned if they didn't:

People think women who do not want to marry unfeminine: people think women who do want to marry immodest: people combine both opinions by regarding it as unfeminine for women not to look forward longingly to wifehood as the hope and purpose of their lives, and ridiculing or contemning any individual women of their acquaintance whom they suspect of entertaining such a longing. This is hard upon marriageable women.<sup>80</sup>

It was a phenomenon also observed by Frances Power Cobbe:

It is curious to note that while, on the one hand we are urged to make marriage the sole vocation of women, we are simultaneously met on the other by the outpourings of ridicule and contempt on all who for themselves, or even for their children, seek ever so indirectly to attain this vocation.<sup>81</sup>

Foremost amongst the denigrators of Society girls, and not just husband-hunters, was Eliza Lynn Linton whose 'Girl of the Period' article in the Saturday Review, with her subsequent pieces on the same theme, provoked much discussion on the subject.<sup>82</sup> 'The Girl of the Period', Linton averred, aped the behaviour of the *demi-monde*, and,

... is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion - a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses.<sup>83</sup>

Paradoxically, while Linton condemned young ladies who imitated *demi-mondaines*, W R Greg recommended that they copy the 'attractive' aspects of *demi-mondaine* behaviour in order to make themselves more marriageable. The women of the *demi-monde* had become more 'clever and amusing, usually more beautiful, and not unfrequently (in external demeanour at least) as modest as their rivals in more recognised society', and it was these qualities that Greg suggested should be imitated.<sup>84</sup>

The desperation with which young women were supposed to pursue eligible men also provided material for novelists, Trollope in particular being a keen observer of matrimonial manoeuvres. The Longstaffe daughters, having aimed too high socially in



the marriage market and finding their youth slipping away, threaten rebellion when their father refuses a further London Season on the grounds of expense.<sup>85</sup> Georgiana Longstaffe in desperation engages herself to a Jewish widower from Denmark Hill - a match regarded as so degrading by her family that her brother threatens to lock her up - only to break off the engagement when she discovers her fiancé does not intend to offer her a house in town. The French sisters' squabbling over Mr Gibson culminates in the kitchen knives having to be hidden from the losing sister when she displays homicidal tendencies towards her triumphant sibling.<sup>86</sup> Lady Mabel Grex, having manoeuvred Lord Silverbridge into an insincere proposal of marriage, releases him from it under the influence of her better feelings knowing that in doing so she has sealed her own fate, 'A woman unless she marries is nothing, as I have become nothing now.'<sup>87</sup>

Women who became 'nothing' could be divided (à la Greg) into women who had nothing to live on and women who had nothing to do. In an ideal world, women who did not marry would live in mutually supportive harmony with their parents until the latter's death, when they would become the responsibility of other male relatives. However, not all single women had male relatives able or willing to support them, and in a patriarchal environment where it was often difficult for women to claim basic social, political and humanitarian rights this left the single woman at the mercy of a society inclined to reject those who had failed in the business of marriage.

Were it our ordinary lot, were every woman living to have either father, brother, or husband to watch over and protect her, then, indeed the harsh but salutary doctrine of self-dependence need never be heard of. But it is not so. In spite of the pretty ideals of poets, the easy taken-for-granted truths of old-fashioned educators of female youth, this fact remains patent to any person of common-sense and experience, that in the present day, whether voluntarily or not, one half of our women are obliged to take care of themselves - obliged to look solely to themselves for maintenance, position, occupation, amusement, reputation, life.<sup>88</sup>

Craik's estimate that 50% of women had to look after themselves calls into question the philosophy propounded by Elizabeth Sewell - the 'easy taken-for-granted truths of old-fashioned educators of youth' - that a passive course of education must be followed by those intended to do nothing more than inhabit the domestic sphere, that girls must be 'educated to wait'.



Even when the families of unmarried women provided for them their lives could still be problematical. The fictitious Lucy Robarts (Framley Parsonage), young and attractive, automatically enters her brother's household on the death of her father and becomes the favourite of the nursery, a comfort and help to the family and in the parish, and is rewarded (not without some difficulty) by marriage to a member of the aristocracy.<sup>89</sup>

In the real world, however, Christina Rossetti, older and therefore considered less attractive, found life intolerable as a dependent female relative in the *ménage* of her newly-married brother, despite efforts on both sides to promote harmony, and decamped with her mother to live with two elderly aunts. Her elder sister Maria, having earned her living as a governess and language teacher all her adult life, had sensibly joined an Anglican community some time before.

Unmarried women who had no financial security needed, firstly, to rid themselves of any idea that they could rely on men, and secondly, to acquire the means of earning an independent income. The obvious and recognised solution was suitable remunerative occupations - careers for women. This solution posed another problem, however, in that such employment hardly existed: for upper and middle-class women obliged to support themselves there were few respectable alternatives to teaching, either in the small private establishments which were the only schools available to girls, or as a governess (the 1851 census showed that 24,770 women were working as governesses). The efforts of Kate Nickleby<sup>90</sup> to earn a living firstly in a high-class dressmaking establishment and then as a paid companion, and of Ruth Pinch<sup>91</sup> as a governess, were by no means atypical. Augusta Webster observed that fewer qualifications were needed to become a governess than a companion: 'Companionship however could not, like governess-ship be undertaken without any qualifications at all [...] not every woman who employers would readily believe a sufficient teacher could hope to be thought eligible for a companion.'<sup>92</sup>

Competition for jobs was intense, consequently salaries were low, qualifications not always necessary, and, more often than not, this led to the ill-educated ill-educating the next generation. As Augusta Webster again observed, '... the education of girls being such that any woman with good manners was thought competent to conduct it.'<sup>93</sup>

In Cranford (1853), Mary Smith, endeavouring to help Miss Matty, who has been ruined by a bank failure,



thought of all the things by which a woman, past middle age, and with the education common to ladies fifty years ago, could earn or add to a living, without losing caste; but at length I put even this last chance on one side and wondered what in the world Miss Matty could do.<sup>94</sup>

Teaching, 'of course, the first thing that suggested itself' is rejected because of the paucity of Miss Matty's own education and because of her innate helplessness. The solution is that Miss Matty becomes an agent for the East India Tea Company, selling tea from her dining-parlour. This means that Miss Matty, from the professional-clerical class, loses social status by 'condescending to anything like trade', although it is trade in the most genteel manner. She was, moreover, able to raise capital through a sale of furniture to finance her tea venture, and was therefore spared the additional indignity of being in paid employment. Miss Matty, not surprisingly, turns out to be a rather less than competent tradesperson, and is rescued by the sudden return of a long-lost brother. She is also helped secretly by her gentlewoman friends who each subscribe a part of their own incomes to keep her from unladylike destitution.

For those women whose friends and relatives did not rescue them, an alternative to governessing quite heavily promoted in the mid-nineteenth century was the female emigration movement which encouraged single women to emigrate to the colonies. Unfortunately, there were very few employment opportunities for educated women in the colonies, although domestic servants were in short supply. There was, however, every chance that they might marry there as men outnumbered women quite considerably. Some ladies seized the opportunity and emigrated to jobs that they would have rejected in England for fear of losing caste, taking positions as superior upper servants, for example. Mary Taylor, a friend of Charlotte Brontë, went out to New Zealand, opened a general store, traded in cattle, speculated in land, and found the lack of social constraint liberating.<sup>95</sup> The proportion of unmarried women from the middle classes and above who actually did emigrate was not large, however.

Amongst feminist writers who considered the problem of careers for women was Harriet Martineau, who, in a Cornhill article of 1865, declared that:

Any pretence of horror or disgust at women having to work, is mere affectation in a country and a time when half the women must work in order to live, and when one-third of them must be independent workers.<sup>96</sup>



Amongst careers recently opened to women, Martineau listed 'telegraphing, or law-copying, or engraving, or printing, or book-keeping', but noted that the sewing machine was causing much unemployment amongst dressmakers. Her solution was nursing, 'a vocation for women almost entirely neglected in this country;-an occupation combining the advantages which Adam Smith represents as alternatives - of social repute and pecuniary profit'. Martineau claimed that 'tens of thousands' of trained nurses were needed both in Britain and in the colonies, and that the financial rewards far exceeded those expected by governesses and milliners. Furthermore, 'every female born into the world is a nurse by nature'. Martineau claimed that the lady Superintendents of nursing training establishments were short of applicants to fill the available places. She was ignoring here, however, not only the very strict, class-based entrance requirements, but also the rigid discipline imposed on trainee nurses which would have been off-putting to all but the most determined. Martha Vicinus records that, in the 1860s, nursing reformers were determined to create 'a profession for single women of impeccable moral standards'.<sup>97</sup> The early lady probationers were expected to work a fifteen-hour day, seven days a week and attend lectures in their off hours.<sup>98</sup> The picture that Martineau painted of nursing was idealized and placed more emphasis on the gratitude of patients and the special status of nurses than on the grim realities of the profession.

Suggestions for employment for ladies were many and various, particularly from female writers. Augusta Webster suggested engraving on glass and painting on china and tiles as occupations that might profitably be turned into professions for gentlewomen.<sup>99</sup> Anne Ritchie's Cornhill article also investigated the employment possibilities open to women. She urged first of all the importance of training for a profession, suggesting Schools of Art, and then concentrating on the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, based in Langham Place. The Society apprenticed girls to 'hair-dressing, printing, law-copying and dial-painting' and was continually seeking new opportunities.<sup>100</sup> Founded by Barbara Leigh Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes, Adelaide Proctor and Jessie Boucherett, the Society also published the English Woman's Journal, a forum for women's issues which regularly listed Anglican Sisterhoods in its suggestions for women's work.<sup>101</sup>

The women employed by the printing press were in fact compositors rather than printers and men were employed to do the actual heavy printing work. The women were paid, however, at the same rate as the men. The law stationer's office was run and staffed



entirely by women. The establishments were not intended to help women of Ritchie's own class:

In these two places I have seen in what way ladies have tried to help, not ladies, but women of a higher class than needlewomen and shopwomen and servants.<sup>102</sup>

However, Ritchie, writing as a prosperous, married upper-middle class lady, did not see why ladies might not work in either place. She also thought that if 'a lady could earn 60*l.* a-year as a cook, it seems to me more dignified to cook than to starve on a pittance of 30*l.* or 20*l.* as so many must do.' Like Martineau, Ritchie did not address the question of caste.

If much media attention and intellectual effort was given to the problem of single women who needed to earn their own livings, two further groups of woman in search of employment also gave some cause for concern: those whom Greg described as without financial worries but 'who beg for occupation', and those in Society, involved in a 'dreary round of pleasure'.

Eliza Lynn Linton's articles about dissolute, amoral and pleasure-seeking young ladies and the public discussion that accompanied them formed the basis for Penelope Holland's Macmillan's article, 'Two Girls of the Period. The Upper Side. (By A Belgravian Young Lady)'. Holland claimed that the structure of the society she and her contemporaries moved in prohibited them from doing anything other than throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the Season or turning to religion:

It would be easy to prove that in the present day there is scarcely any alternative for a girl in fashionable society, between reckless dissipation and a convent life. The latter is becoming oftener chosen year by year; but the many hinderances which English feeling throws in the way of it makes the world still the commonest choice for those whose eyes are open to the dangers and the evils of both.<sup>103</sup>

Holland claimed that this situation arose because girls in fashionable society were thwarted at every turn when they tried to occupy themselves usefully. The 'desultory education' they received, combined with a smattering of three or four modern languages might make them eager to find out more about the world around them and to continue and extend their education. Holland proposed the case of an imaginary, but typical,

seventeen-year old trying to pursue a course of learning independently at home, but being hampered by her family who were afraid of her becoming a 'blue'. The girl is given to understand that her duties lie at home and within her family - 'woman's work is home work and home influence' - but she has no household duties and her family is busy with its individual concerns. Attempts to help in the parish or at the school will probably be blocked because of the fear of infectious disease. At the same time, she attends church as a matter of course and hears the preacher 'extol the merits of self-denial and self-sacrifice'. Finding no permissible outlet for her good intentions and her youthful energy, 'she reflects that her education and her accomplishments can never be of the slightest use to anyone save herself, and she cannot see clearly that they will even help her'.<sup>104</sup>

It is at this point that her mother launches her upon Society and the 'weary, purposeless round of gaiety' and a gradual corruption of her finer feelings until she becomes to a greater or lesser extent a 'Girl of the Period'. If she does not marry she will be 'treated up to the confines of middle life as if still a child' until the breaking up of her home (on the death of her parents) forces her into a desolate and resourceless old age. Holland allowed that this would be an extreme case, and that most unmarried women were their own mistresses after thirty, that is, when they were no longer considered eligible. But, she added, 'is it not adding insult to injury, after keeping her for ten or twelve years in forced and demoralizing idleness, to bid her then set to work and begin a new life'.<sup>105</sup>

Holland's solution to the problems faced by her contemporaries included better education for girls, the opening up of those professions deemed suitable for educated women, and the formation of secular charitable organisations which would counter the attractions of Anglican Sisterhoods and Roman Catholic religious orders.

Holland's article was responded to by Daniel Rose Fearon in Macmillan's the following month. He advised young ladies firstly, to be content with their lot and make the best of it, and, secondly, not to agitate publicly for better education and job opportunities, but to go to work quietly from a domestic base if they wanted to change their situation:

Let her coax, plead, write, and influence by all possible means the conscience or the feelings of fathers and brothers.<sup>106</sup>



In other words, women should somehow remain passive within the domestic sphere and use their innate influence for moral good to persuade the men who benefitted from their passivity to make radical changes.

That those men who could afford to, and some who couldn't, continued to bring up their daughters in the expectation of lifelong idleness was perhaps due as much to an idealized conception of the nature and role of women as by concern for their own public persona as men of property. That is, that women were naturally conditioned to look after others and that woman's work was essentially domestic and family-orientated.

Amongst the claims made by Penelope Holland in her 'Two Girls of the Period' article was that the excessive amount of leisure at the disposal of upper class young ladies led to a growing popularity in church-going, particularly to fashionable Ritualist churches. This in turn led to an attraction towards Roman Catholicism, perceived by some as a natural extension of High Anglicanism, or to the work of Anglican Sisterhoods. It was a chain of events commented on by, among others, Frances Power Cobbe.<sup>107</sup>

The opportunities offered by Sisterhoods for a form of independent life and socially useful work, combined with the growing concern expressed by women about restrictions on their employment and occupation would seem to have influenced the growth of the movement. Officially, Sisterhoods existed for women with a genuine vocation to serve Christ and follow his teaching in dedicating themselves to the service of the poor. They also, however, offered an alternative to the social and economic pressures of the marriage market, and to the emotional pressure often exerted by the family - what Florence Nightingale described as 'the petty grinding tyranny of a good English family'.<sup>108</sup>

Although the majority of recommendations for 'Protestant nunneries' in the years before the nineteenth century had centred on their potential as sanctuaries for spinsters and widows, the new Sisterhoods were not dumping grounds for incapable single women. Rather, they offered the opportunity of useful work and the exercise of intellect for those who had chosen, or resigned themselves to, celibacy, were willing to work and wanted to put their abilities to good purpose but were restricted by the social and moral constraints imposed on them. These constraints were those encountered by the fictional Dorothea Brooke whose sincere, if ill-defined, desire to do good was frustrated by the narrow

confines of the society in which she lived.<sup>109</sup> In the Prelude to Middlemarch (1872) Eliot discusses the plight of 'later-born St Therasas' who wanted to fulfill a spiritual ideal but who were doomed to failure because the age in which they lived had 'no coherent social faith and order'.<sup>110</sup> Anglican Sisterhoods provided a shared faith and structure within which women at least had the chance of discovering or fulfilling their potential.

Sisterhoods also provided a home for life amongst women of similar social status so that in theory they suffered no loss of caste. If a dowry or annual payment was not required, was not excessive, or could be subsidised, they offered opportunities, too, for ladies with restricted financial resources. Although they may not have been losing caste through association, the fact that they were defying social expectations of women born to be 'idle' meant that in some eyes they were degrading themselves. The question of whether or not they were further degraded by their association with the lowest classes, or by the menial tasks they were asked to perform was one frequently raised by critics of the movement. The response of the Sisterhoods would have been that, on the contrary, if a task was performed for love of God and in the course of divinely ordered service its status was elevated to the spiritual, and in support of this they doubtless quoted Herbert (a favourite of the Oxford Movement) whose poems were often popularized as hymns in the nineteenth century:

'Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in any thing,  
To do it as for thee:

A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgerie divine:  
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,  
Makes that and th'action fine.'<sup>111</sup>

That many Sisters thrived on the work that was expected of them, and on the close companionship of other women, is evinced both by the numbers who chose to stay in communities until their death, and the fact that the average age of death was 73 years 6 months as opposed to 66 years for women of the same social standing, in defiance of popular medical opinion of the physical limitations of women.<sup>112</sup> The reaction to ladies leaving their families, assuming the habit and undertaking difficult, dangerous and physically demanding work will be discussed in the next chapter.



- <sup>1</sup> Sister Miriam, Society of St Margaret, 1878, quoted in, Doing the Impossible: A short Historical Sketch of St Margaret's Convent, East Grinstead 1855-1980, produced by the Society of St Margaret, undated, no publisher.
- <sup>2</sup> Michael Hill, The Religious Order. A study of virtuoso religion and its legitimation in the nineteenth-century Church of England (London: Heineman, 1973), p.271
- <sup>3</sup> Martha Vicinus, Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920 (London: Virago, 1985), p.48
- <sup>4</sup> John Shelton Reed, Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), p.204
- <sup>5</sup> Reed, p.209
- <sup>6</sup> For example, A.L.M., 'Two Sisters of Seville' in Horner's Stories
- <sup>7</sup> For example, Ann Radcliffe, The Italian (1897) or M G Lewis, The Monk (1796)
- <sup>8</sup> A M Allchin, The Silent Rebellion (London: SCM Press, 1958), p.120
- <sup>9</sup> Works of John Bramhall (Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology, Oxford, 1845), vol. I, pp.118-120, quoted in Peter Anson, The Call of the Cloister (London: SPCK, 1955), p.4
- <sup>10</sup> Both feature largely in J H Shorthouse's John Inglesant (1880), described by Joseph Ellis Baker as 'the greatest Anglo-Catholic novel of the Victorian Age', The Novel and the Oxford Movement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), p.182. Guy Morville, in Charlotte M Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe (1853), is an admirer of Charles I.
- <sup>11</sup> See, Bridget Hill, 'The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery' in, Past and Present, No.117, November 1987, pp.107-130.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Anson, p.13
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Bridget Hill, p.114
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, (1621) quoted in, Bridget Hill, p.111
- <sup>15</sup> John Bellers, Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry, etc (1696), quoted in Bridget Hill, p.114
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas Becon, The Catechism of Thomas Becon quoted in, Bridget Hill, p.110
- <sup>17</sup> Samuel Wesley, A Letter Concerning the Religious Societies, (1724) quoted in, Bridget Hill, p.121
- <sup>18</sup> Samuel Richardson, The History of Sir Charles Grandison, Bart. (London: 1902), vol.IV, p.194, Letter XXII
- <sup>19</sup> Both Henry Kingsley's Mademoiselle Mathilde (1868) and Charlotte Yonge's The Young Stepmother (1861) feature a French convent fleeing to England to escape the Revolution.
- <sup>20</sup> Anson, p.25
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Southey, Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society (1829), Vol.II, p.317, quoted in, Allchin, p.42.

- 22 Michael Hill, p.169
- 23 Southey, vol.I, p.403, quoted in, Michael Hill, p.169.
- 24 See Michael Hill, pp.218-222
- 25 Anson, p.230, Michael Hill, p.150
- 26 Anson, p.232
- 27 H P Liddon, E B Pusey (London, 1894), Vol.III, pp.18-21, quoted in, Anson, p.226 and Allchin, p.62.
- 28 Anson, p.288
- 29 Allchin, p.61
- 30 Susan Mumm, 'Lady Guerillas of Philanthropy: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian England', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1992), p.342
- 31 Penelope Holland, 'Two Girls of the Period. The Upper Side. Our Offence, Our Defence, and Our Petition', Macmillan's Magazine 19 (February 1869) pp.323-331
- 32 Reed, p.187
- 33 G F A Best, 'Popular Protestantism in Victorian Britain', Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clarke, ed. Robert Robson (London: Bell, 1967), pp.118-126
- 34 Best, pp.127-133
- 35 D G Paz, Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.27
- 36 Paz, p.59
- 37 Reed, p.202
- 38 Mumm, p.343
- 39 For discussions of this lengthy process see, Michael Hill, chap.6, and Allchin, Part II
- 40 Michael Hill, p.210
- 41 See, Sean Gill, 'The Power of Christian Ladyhood: Priscilla Lydia Sellon and the Creation of Anglican Sisterhoods' in Modern Religious Rebels ed. Stuart Mews (London: Epworth, 1993), p.146
- 42 'The vicar of the parish expressed the benevolent wish that infectious disease might break out so that he could ask the Sisterhoods to undertake the first case of it, with the pious wish that it would get rid of them!' Marcus Fitzgerald Grain Donovan, After the Tractarians, p.43, quoted in Michael Hill, p.196
- 43 Mumm, Appendices 5 and 6, for an extensive analysis of class backgrounds and parental occupations for choir and lay Sisters. Appendix 7 gives an analysis of sisters' previous occupations at St Mary the Virgin, Wantage, a single order community.
- 44 In Charlotte M Yonge's The Pillars of the House (1873), Felix Underwood leaves provision in his will for £50 per annum to be paid [to the Sisterhood] if any of his sisters should enter a Sisterhood (London: Macmillan, 1880) Vol II, p.642.



- <sup>45</sup> For example, the work of Father Lowder of St Peter's, London Docks. Lowder was helped and supported in his work by the Community of the Holy Cross, founded by Elizabeth Neale, sister of J M Neale, of St Margaret's.
- <sup>46</sup> Taken from Doing the Impossible.
- <sup>47</sup> The school was a great success, but in 1902 separated from East Grinstead, and in 1908 went over to Rome *en masse*.
- <sup>48</sup> Mumm, Appendix 9
- <sup>49</sup> Anson, p.347
- <sup>50</sup> Reed, p.49
- <sup>51</sup> Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (London: Peregrine, 1979)
- <sup>52</sup> Dora Greenwell in her North British Review article of 1862, 'Our Single Women', quotes Genesis 2. 24 to support this view.
- <sup>53</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, 'Celibacy and Marriage', Fraser's 65 (February 1862), pp.228-235
- <sup>54</sup> A contributing factor to the excess of unmarried women was that there were simply more women than men (due to a higher male mortality rate) in the British Isles and that therefore a percentage of women would have to remain single. See, W R Greg, 'Why are Women redundant', Fraser's 65 (April 1862), pp.435-460.
- <sup>55</sup> Greg, p.436
- <sup>56</sup> The latter is the class dealt with in Penelope Holland's Macmillan article, 'Two Girls of the Period. The Upper Side'.
- <sup>57</sup> Dora Greenwell, 'Our Single Women', North British Review 36 (February 1862), pp.62-87
- <sup>58</sup> Cobbe, 'Celibacy v. Marriage', p.229
- <sup>59</sup> See also Cobbe's article on the financial and legal inequalities suffered by married women, 'Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors', Fraser's, Vol.78, (December 1868), pp.777-794
- <sup>60</sup> Anne Thackeray Ritchie, 'Toilers and Spinsters', The Cornhill Magazine, 3 (March 1861), pp.318-331
- <sup>61</sup> Ritchie, p.520
- <sup>62</sup> Dinah Mulock Craik, 'On Sisterhoods', About Money and Other Things (London: Macmillan, 1886) in, Maude, On Sisterhoods, A Woman's Thoughts ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Pickering, 1993), p.53
- <sup>63</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'Give Us Room' in, My Miscellanies (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), estimated that it took 18 yards of expensive material (e.g. velvet or tulle) to cover the crinoline of a ballgown that might only be worn once. He also noted that the shape, width and movement of a crinoline allowed a woman who previously 'waddled' to move 'voluptuously'.
- <sup>64</sup> Wanda F Neff, Victorian Working Women (London: Heinemann, 1966), p.186

- <sup>65</sup> This is the fate of the Nickleby family at the beginning of Nicholas Nickleby (1839), and also of Miss Matty in Cranford (1853): the failure of investments in the former case, and of a financial institution in the second, mean that capital invested is lost, and consequently the income thus derived.
- <sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, Principles of Education, Drawn from Nature and Revelation, and Applied to Female Education in the Upper Classes (London: 1868)
- <sup>67</sup> 'Female Education', The Quarterly Review 126 (April 1869) pp.448-479
- <sup>68</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, Life (London: Richard Bentley, 1894), quoted in Martha Vicinus, Independent Women (London: Virago, 1985), p.38
- <sup>69</sup> Herbert Spencer, Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical (London: Williams and Norgate, 1861), pp.186-8, taken from Embodied Selves, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.373
- <sup>70</sup> Henry Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and Education', Fortnightly Review, n.s.15 (April 1874) pp.468-9, taken from Embodied Selves, p.380
- <sup>71</sup> George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, (London: Penguin, 1985), p.220
- <sup>72</sup> Greenwell, p.72
- <sup>73</sup> Sewell, Principles of Education, quoted in 'Female Education', Quarterly Review, Vol.126, (April 1869), p.453
- <sup>74</sup> Spencer, in Embodied Selves, p.374
- <sup>75</sup> See Embodied Selves, Section III, Part 2
- <sup>76</sup> 'Two Girls of the Period', p.324
- <sup>77</sup> Augusta Webster, 'The Dearth of Husbands' in A Housewife's Opinions (London: 1879), p.240
- <sup>78</sup> Leonore Davidoff, The Best Circles (London: Croom Helm, 1973)
- <sup>79</sup> R Neville, ed., The Reminiscences of Lady Neville (London: 1909)
- <sup>80</sup> Augusta Webster, 'Husband-hunting and Match-making' in A Housewife's Opinions (London: 1879), p.234
- <sup>81</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, 'What shall we do with our old maids?', Fraser's Magazine 66 (November 1862), pp.594-610
- <sup>82</sup> Augusta Webster, however, suggested that the author of recent short essays on the depravity of English ladies, i.e. Linton, wrote them simply as an exercise in wit and raciness, and that there was no real truth in their allegations ('The Depravity of English Ladies', A Housewife's Opinions). The Universal Magazine, November 1810, some 60 years before Linton, had claimed that fashionable women had 'a freedom of manners, a boldness of look and scantiness of apparel' which made them indistinguishable from harlots. It would seem that the behaviour of women in the public arena had always been fair game for comment. Daniel Rose Fearon, in his article 'The Ladies' Cry, Nothing to Do!' (Macmillan's, Vol.19, March 1869, pp.451-454), denied that the 'Girls of the Period' were the 'daughters and wives of our nobility and of our old houses', but were the 'daughters of our *nouveaux riches*; whose wealth has outstripped their civilization'. He also thought that the author of the 'Girl of the Period' was a man.
- <sup>83</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', The Saturday Review, October 1868



- 84 Greg, p.453
- 85 Anthony Trollope, The Way We Live Now (London: Chapman and Hall, 1875)
- 86 Anthony Trollope, He Knew He Was Right (London: Strahan, 1869)
- 87 Anthony Trollope, The Duke's Children (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880)
- 88 Dinah Craik, A Woman's Thoughts About Women [1858] in Maude, On Sisterhoods and A Woman's Thoughts about Women ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993)
- 89 Anthony Trollope, Framley Parsonage (London: Smith, Elder, 1861)
- 90 Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839)
- 91 Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit (London: Chapman and Hall, 1844)
- 92 Webster, 'The Dearth of Husbands', p.240
- 93 Webster, 'The Dearth of Husbands', p.240
- 94 Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford (London: Penguin, 1976), p.184
- 95 James A Hammerton, Emigrant Gentlewomen (London, Croom Helm, 1979)
- 96 Harriet Martineau, 'Nurses Wanted', Cornhill Magazine, Vol 11, April 1865, pp.409-425
- 97 Vicinus, p.85
- 98 Vicinus, p.91
- 99 Webster, 'The Depravity of English Ladies', p.20
- 100 Ritchie, p.323
- 101 Mumm, p.287
- 102 Ritchie, p.326
- 103 Holland, p.324
- 104 Holland, p.325
- 105 Holland, p.327
- 106 Daniel Rose Fearon, 'The Ladies' Cry, Nothing to Do', Macmillan's 19 ( March 1869), pp.45-454
- 107 For example, 'Lent in Belgravia' and 'The Vestment Fever', Re-echoes (London and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1876), pp.48-53 and pp.236-240
- 108 Quoted in Allchin, p.115
- 109 George Eliot, Middlemarch (London: Blackwood, 1872)
- 110 Middlemarch, (London: Penguin, 1994), Prelude, p.25

<sup>111</sup> George Herbert, 'The Elixir', The English Poems of George Herbert ed. C A Patrides (London: J M Dent & Sons, 1984), p.188

<sup>112</sup> Mumm, p.94



## Chapter 2: Family Duties, the Influence of Ladies and the Dangers of Rome

*'Unmarried women were necessary to care for orphans, prostitutes, female prisoners, helpless old and the sick. Beyond other ages Victorians knew that gentle ladies could only work in Stepney and nurse cholera if sustained by grace beyond the common lot.'*<sup>1</sup>

In 1852, Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter, responding to complaints about 'Roman practices' in Priscilla Sellon's Devonport Sisterhood, remarked that he 'could wish the cross and flowers had not been placed on the altar in the Oratory. But ladies were ladies.'<sup>2</sup> As late as 1866 the Pall Mall Gazette considered that 'unmarried and cultivated women of the middle and upper classes' needed a 'distinctly recognised religious bond' involving 'clouds of incense' to sustain them in hard and dangerous work.<sup>3</sup>

The attraction of the Oxford Movement for women was, it seems, indulgently attributed to medieval millinery and the appeal of ritual. The 'millinery' side of the Movement, particularly elaborately embroidered vestments, provided a source of humour for critics, Punch in particular. Frances Power Cobbe observed that it was 'curious' that in an age 'when everything verging on "loudness" is condemned by public taste, the ministers of the National Church of England should thus revive the hues of a drawing room of the age of Gainsborough and Romney, and flourish about our churches like so many macaws.'<sup>4</sup>

The appeal of High Church ritual to the senses - the burning of incense, the colour of stained glass, vestments and church hangings, and chanting, intoning and choral singing - was also regarded with suspicion. If an aesthetic response heightened or enhanced the religious experience, as supporters of the Oxford Movement believed, some observers thought they saw a danger in the overwhelming sensuality of ritual. When such ritual was conducted by gorgeously dressed young men the moral danger to susceptible women became acute: it might not be simply the mass that they found attractive. This danger was compounded by the promotion of private confession by some members of the Movement, when women were encouraged to talk about deeply personal matters in close physical proximity to men. If these men had religious ideas which predisposed them to celibacy, the 'unnatural' restraints this put on them would in turn make them sexually susceptible to the presence of women. Ritualism, like the Roman Catholicism it appeared to resemble, seemed to offer opportunities for corruption, if not immorality.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time there was a growing realisation that the Oxford Movement did not simply require its female followers to sit passively and luxuriate in the sensuality of the ritual. Part of the underlying philosophy of the Movement was the idea of serving others as Christ had served his fellow men. This not infrequently involved hard and unpleasant work. It also came to be realised that such work had attractions for well-bred young women and this caused concern in some quarters and derision in others. Cobbe, for instance, regarded the mock-ascetic Lenten practices of the upper classes with some suspicion. While they did not go so far as to fast in any serious way, Cobbe suggested satirically that they imposed other penances upon themselves including not going to balls, reducing the splendour of their dress, attending matins and cleaning the church. While Cobbe found these 'sacrifices' acceptable, if amusing, she detected underlying elements which troubled her. Getting up early for matins was acceptable, but cleaning the church was quite another thing:

The use of the besom is not familiar to the hands of high-born damsels, the pounding and shaking of hassocks and cushions is laborious, and dust in general is disagreeable. All these things, of course, fill the amateur housemaids (or rather Churchmaids) with a delightful sense of doing something at once novel and meritorious.<sup>6</sup>

It was usual to regard ladies performing menial tasks as not only socially degrading but also physically and even morally dangerous, the anonymous author of a pamphlet, The Sister of Mercy, for example, tries to show how its central character, Lady Tempest, is not only reduced to poor health by her work as an Associate Sister, but is exposed to the immorality of the poorest classes of society.<sup>7</sup> However Cobbe seemed more concerned that these ladies were playing at humbling themselves as a temporary amusement and flirting with asceticism, in itself dangerously introspective, instead of turning 'to some real work for God and for mankind, and, instead of keeping the mind centred on itself, to raise it up to aims capable of kindling in our souls such a flame as to burn out self-indulgence'.<sup>8</sup>

Asceticism, particularly in connection with High Church practices, was associated with the worst excesses of Roman Catholicism and was obviously to be avoided. Although not condemning the 'religious feelings of our young ladies', Cobbe felt that they could be directed more outwardly into 'some far healthier channels', and developed continuously instead of bursting out for just 40 days of the year. She concurred with Penelope Holland<sup>9</sup> in believing that many upper class girls would welcome the chance to do some useful work as a 'corrective bitter' to a life of almost unlimited leisure. Amongst her suggestions were



workhouse visiting and the Association for Befriending Young Servants, with of course the blessing of the girls' parents.

Parental approval was needed for any kind of action outside the home, and this proved a sticking point not only for women who wanted to direct their religious energies usefully but remain family-based, but also for those who wanted to take a further step and join an Anglican community. Although most communities were wary of accepting postulants who faced serious parental opposition, instances of women being accepted because their lives at home were unbearable were not unknown.<sup>10</sup> Emily Scobell, 'a society beauty', who ran away from her Evangelical clergyman father in Sussex, was reluctantly allowed to join the community of St Margaret's by John Mason Neale despite her father's extreme opposition.<sup>11</sup> Neale claimed that he was persuaded by her accounts of 'what she suffered at home, and more especially [about] the paroxysms of anger, to which even her presence seemed sometimes to excite her father'.<sup>12</sup> Scobell's father described his daughter, who was in her late twenties or early thirties, as 'an overwrought, dissatisfied and disobedient child, yielding herself to undue spiritual influence'.<sup>13</sup> He was particularly outraged that she had for some time been meeting Neale secretly for confession. For his part, Neale accused the Rev Mr Scobell of domestic tyranny; of opening his daughter's post, reading her diary to the rest of the family, and general abuse of paternal authority.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that Sisterhoods undermined the influence of the family was a very common one, and accusations of alienating the affections of postulants were not uncommon. Michael Hill cites two cases, in 1850 and 1866, where prominent Ritualist clergymen were publicly accused of enticing women to join Sisterhoods without the consent of their parents.<sup>15</sup> In these cases the accusations were unfounded, but such fears were not uncommon, and were fuelled by the plethora of anti-Catholic and anti-convent propaganda which emerged after the 1850 re-establishment of the Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy. The eponymous heroine of Sister Agnes; or, The Captive Nun (1854) is tempted away from home and into a convent (where she soon dies) by a devious, proselytising Roman Catholic priest.<sup>16</sup> In George Borrow's Lavengro (1851) a red-haired priest attempts to pervert the daughters of a respectable English family travelling in Italy.<sup>17</sup> Mr Scobell contributed to the genre with his own pamphlets denouncing the Society of St Margaret, and accusing them of 'capturing' his daughter.<sup>18</sup>

The fear that Sisterhoods might undermine parental authority was not the only reason a family might object to a daughter or sister joining one. They were also a totally

strange environment which women entered into, it was thought, unprotected and alone. Apart from alarmist notions of convents promoted by the sort of writing just mentioned, because Sisterhoods were averse to publicity, it was difficult to conceive exactly what they were and what they did.

The idea of young, or, given the average age of profession (33), not so young, middle-and upper-class ladies leaving home to live in a totally different environment was new. To live, possibly far away, with other women to whom they were not related (although these were almost certainly guaranteed to be ladies too) under a regime wildly different from that of home, was alarming enough to the average upper-middle-class family, even when they shared their daughter's religious enthusiasms. Their daughter would also be leaving a male-led environment for one where direct masculine influence would be at most minimal, and where all decisions concerning the direction her life would take would be made by a woman to whom she was not related.<sup>19</sup> Added to this the fact that their daughter would be working for, and associated with, the poor, the sick and possibly the criminal, with the inherent dangers of physical and moral contamination, it is not surprising that many parents, and indeed many observers, felt that the Anglican religious life was completely alien to everything the upper-middle classes regarded as central to their being.

Joining a Sisterhood not only meant rejecting the values of the family home - one Sister recalled the shock of discovering at her first mealtime in her community that she was to use pewter and earthenware instead of china and crystal<sup>20</sup> - but also involved other radical changes. Most Sisters changed their name when they professed (this did not happen in all communities) so that they were in effect rejecting both the name their parents had given them at birth, and their family name. They also changed their dress, from the fashionable crinolines and bonnets provided by, or approved of by their families, to the distinctive habit and veil, or to some other, simple distinguishing style of dress. It is also possible that, due to the fact that habits were unwaisted, some of them may have stopped wearing stays.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, there was the vexed question of vows - to whom should they be given? should they be taken at all? Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford, whose dioceses included Clewer and Wantage, was generally supportive of Sisterhoods, but would not countenance vows. Some communities simply took a vow of obedience on profession, others included obedience and poverty and some also took a vow of chastity. As most Sisterhoods drew up or invented their own Rules they could do as the Mother Foundress saw fit. Some made vows privately, others did so in the presence of a sympathetic clergyman, preferably a



bishop. When Sisters did make vows they were not perpetual, having to be renewed annually, following the model of French Sisters of Mercy. Whereas the idea of obedience, vowing allegiance away from the family was problematical, and poverty presented questions of appropriate standards of living for ladies, a vow of chastity had peculiar implications of its own. The idea of chastity for unmarried woman was not in the least in opposition to mid-Victorian middle class thinking, but the possibility of a commitment to perpetual celibacy (and the dangers inherent in repressing natural urges, so graphically portrayed in ultra-Protestant literature) was alarming to observers. If the idea of a celibate man, as in the Roman Catholic priesthood and increasingly amongst Anglo-Catholic clergy, was considered (by Charles Kingsley, for example, amongst others) unmanly and unnatural, then the same opprobrium was attached to women, particularly Roman Catholic nuns, who deliberately chose celibacy. It was not only unwomanly and unnatural not to want to marry and rear children, but such women were frequently portrayed as making themselves vulnerable to the advances of a celibate and therefore, it was suggested, sexually predatory clergy.<sup>22</sup>

However, the main accusation against Sisterhoods was that they attempted to alienate the affections of their members and to effect a complete break from their families, contrary to the laws of natural affection and the teachings of scripture. This is a major issue in The Sister of Mercy, where Lady Tempest is encouraged by her Superior to neglect not only family ties, but her duty to her late husband's tenants.<sup>23</sup> It is also a central theme in Maude; or the Anglican Sister of Mercy where the editor, Elizabeth Whately, regards family and domestic ties as paramount:

[God] has given us our home ties and duties; and to set these aside for work planned and devised by ourselves is *not* in reality following Him, but following *ourselves*.<sup>24</sup>

Maude was published in 1869, in the wake of the Saurin versus Starr trial when a Roman Catholic nun had taken her convent to court claiming that they had deliberately treated her badly in order to make her leave. In the course of the trial a great many details of convent life were revealed and Maude went over much of the ground covered by the prosecution, but in an Anglican setting. It purports to be the memoirs, from some 20 years back, of an ex-member of an early Sisterhood, but given Whately's own convictions - like her father,



Richard Whately, Bishop of Dublin, she was firmly anti-Ritualist - and the timing of publication, it would be fair to judge that the editorial input was influential.

The Mother Superior in Maude, almost certainly based on Miss Sellon, frequently resorts to underhand means to prevent Maude from seeing her family. It was also an accusation levelled against the real Miss Sellon in one of the many pamphlet skirmishes provoked by her community:

The father will be neglected for the spiritual father, whose power is supposed to be from God; the mother will be deserted for the spiritual mother, who usurps her place in her child's affections, and requires entire obedience to her commands; brothers will be disregarded, and their care and kindness practically forgotten; sisters will be forsaken for the "Sisters of Mercy"; the natural ties of God's appointment will be rent asunder - "spiritual ties" not according to his word will be considered binding and eternal: and all this under the pretence of receiving "houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, with persecutions", and of sacrificing self to God.<sup>25</sup>

The anonymous author of 'Papers on Sisterhoods' which ran for some time in The Monthly Packet, the magazine for High Church young ladies edited by Charlotte Yonge, predictably took an opposing view to this. Advising Superiors on the choice of postulants the author is emphatic about family duties:

Nor is vocation likely to exist where there are plain duties incompatible therewith, already claiming the postulant's attention; and the opposition of parents, or those who stand in the place of parents, and are clothed with their authority, is at any rate a ground for much hesitation and caution in the admission of applicants, because, although there may be, and sometimes are, sufficient countervailing reasons, nevertheless the presumption is, so far, *always* against such cases, and there are few better tests of true vocation than willingness to wait patiently for a change of resolution on the part of those who forbid the application; since if God have really sent the inward call, He will also send a way for lawfully obeying it.<sup>26</sup>

A vocation should not therefore be mistaken, or made an excuse, for escaping pre-existing duties, particularly familial ones. The Oxford Movement's emphasis on duty, obedience and submission to higher authority meant that the most immediate authority (parental) must first be obeyed as being ordained by God (except in extreme cases). Once a vocation had been tested, the higher, spiritual authority would enable the worthy candidate to proceed.



Dinah Mulock Craik in On Sisterhoods (1883) dealt with some of the common objections to Sisterhood life. On Sisterhoods is the account of the profession of a friend in 'one of those Anglican Sisterhoods which their friends so much admire, their foes so sharply condemn'.<sup>27</sup> The friend was thirty with no close family ties, so Craik did not have to deal with any controversy concerning the desertion of domestic duties, indeed, immediately after profession her friend was going to stay with her sister for the birth of her baby. As Craik says later, 'It cannot be too strongly insisted that the family life is the first and most blessed life, and that family duties, in whatever shape they come, ought never to be set aside.'<sup>28</sup>

Craik was careful to avoid accusations of Romanism by making distinctions both between Anglican and Roman Catholic convents and between enclosed orders and Sisters of Mercy, referring to Anglican Sisterhoods as hopefully being,

the ideal Sisterhood, not that corruption of it which rouses the British ire at the very name of "nun". It must be exactly opposite in many things to the Roman Catholic idea of a girl giving up "the world" and becoming "the spouse of Christ".<sup>29</sup>

Anglican Sisters then, were not to disappear forever behind high walls and live a mysterious life of enclosed devotion, cut off from family and friends, as it was popularly supposed Roman Catholic nuns did. Craik claimed that the 'service of God is also best fulfilled through the service of man' and that the ideal Sisterhood was active in helping others.<sup>30</sup>

Her newly-professed friend took Craik to see the orphanage run by her Sisterhood, in particular the very youngest orphans who were overjoyed to see their Sister in her new habit:

Three orphans and a solitary woman, husbandless, childless, laughing and toying together, kissing and kissed, - they made a group so pretty, so happy - so full of God's great mercy, compensation, - that it brought the tears to one's eyes.<sup>31</sup>

Caring for others, then, brings earthly rewards as well as heavenly. The 'compensation' is, presumably two-way: the newly professed Sister is compensated by the love of the orphans for not having a husband and children of her own, and the orphans are compensated by the care of the Sister for not having a mother of their own. Craik is clearly uneasy with the

concept of celibacy and seeking some recompense for the enormity of a sacrifice of the domesticity natural to women.

Despite its anti-Roman Catholicism, Craik's article is a carefully constructed argument in favour of Sisterhoods under certain select circumstances. Her ideal Sisterhood then, consisted of 'women old enough to choose their own lot', who want to work for others but who needed the help and support of a community of others like themselves to do it.<sup>32</sup> She approved of the community's chapel as being 'high' but not Roman, no 'tokens of Mariolatry or saint-worship in it', and also of the service in which her friend is professed.<sup>33</sup> The Sisters' habits, plain black gowns and white or black veils, were 'a costume as becoming and comfortable as any woman can wear', and she found they all had a 'peculiar expression of mingled sweetness and peace ... I have found oftener on the faces of nuns - Catholic *Soeurs de Pauvres* or Protestant Sisters of Charity - than among any other body of women that I know'.<sup>34</sup> Craik put a deliberate emphasis here on non-enclosed or Mercy orders finding contentment and job satisfaction - elsewhere in the article she issues vague warnings about contemplative communities, about flagellation, hairshirts and sleeping on cold stones.

Having constructed an ideal Sisterhood Craik proposed it as a refuge for the 'waifs and strays of gentleness and womanhood' who do not have the strength or ability to live by themselves, in other words, a refuge for the helpless. She saw it as a way in which unmarried women, who otherwise would not know what to do with their lives, could make themselves useful and therefore happy. This is contrary to the views of both Margaret Goodman, once a Sister in Miss Sellon's community, and the author of 'Papers on Sisterhoods'. Goodman was very strongly of the opinion that women who could not organise their lives in a secular setting would be equally incapable of contributing to the life of a religious community:

Those who have been useful in the world, will be useful in a Sisterhood; while those who have cumbered the domestic hearth, will cumber any other household.<sup>35</sup>

The author of 'Papers on Sisterhoods' was of the same opinion, urging Superiors to avoid women who had simply become tired of their homes or quarrelled with their relatives, or who had met with romantic disappointment. Above all, they were to be wary of women from:



... the largest class of all amongst the incapables [which] consists of exactly the same stamp of women as those who swell the ranks of incompetent and wholly unqualified governesses, and who are simply looking for a home for life, without any very clear notion or wish as to earning it honestly.<sup>36</sup>

'Incapable' members of a community were considered by the author of 'Papers on Sisterhoods' to pose a very real threat to its well-being by not contributing fully to communal life and duties and being an insidious and morally debilitating influence on other members, while not actually doing anything to merit expulsion. The message was plainly that Sisterhoods were not refuges for women seeking an easy life, 'It is therefore the wisest plan to begin by keeping out fools.'<sup>37</sup> In fact, the ideal postulant seemed defined as much by class as by religious vocation which was in any case difficult to quantify.

Class, or rather good breeding, seems to have been considered by the author of 'Papers on Sisterhoods' as the paramount requirement for a postulant, although wealth seems to have been equally important:

... there is a more reasonable presumption that women reared in luxury, who are nevertheless ready to accept the privations of the Religious Life, have more true vocation than such as have had a struggle with poverty all their days, and are now chiefly anxious to secure permanent board and lodging, however humble ...<sup>38</sup>

Willingness to give up a privileged lifestyle is apparently acceptable proof of vocation, while the implication is that those from poor backgrounds should be regarded with suspicion as potential freeloaders. However, in a later Paper, 'Grades of the Community', the author allows that women from the lower ranks, 'a humbly-born national schoolmistress or pupil-teacher', may be better educated and be 'more refined in manners and language' than a daughter of the *nouveaux riches*, 'accounted a lady in virtue of the parental mansion in Belgravia ... and other tokens of wealth'.<sup>39</sup> The ideal postulant should be one who will not only contribute to the general tone and character of the community, but who will have made some sort of sacrifice of comfort and privilege as proof of vocation.

Although a 'good general education' was desirable, a tacit acknowledgement of the general inadequacy of contemporary female education inclined the 'Papers' author to consider 'courteous and obliging manners' more important, along with inherent qualities such as good temper and 'straightforward judgement'.<sup>40</sup> Nor did the author consider it



necessary that a postulant demonstrate any proficiency in the special work of a community, e.g. nursing. Adaptability and willingness to learn, to adapt to convent routine, and to work hard were more important. However, it was desirable that a potential Sister should possess a specific talent peculiar to herself, or ability in which she excelled, that would make a contribution to the community's work or general well-being.

In addition, age and health were most important. The minimum age for a postulant recommended by the 'Papers' author was 18 and the maximum, 30, on the principle that by 18 character was already formed but still malleable, and by 30 habits had not yet been acquired that would be hard to change. Mental sanity was the prime health requirement; physical disability, chronic or congenital illness and 'general weakness of health' would all preclude a postulant from fully engaging in the activities of the community and would therefore disqualify such an applicant from acceptance.

The ideal postulant, or future community member, was therefore well-bred, not only in the sense of being from a good family, but also well-mannered and considerate. She would preferably come from a family with a reasonable degree of wealth and would demonstrate some sort of sacrifice in renouncing their lifestyle. She would be in excellent health, with a willingness to learn and undertake any task that was allotted to her, and her family would be in favour of the step she was taking.

The desirability of ladies as postulants raised the question of whether or not communities should adopt the two-tier system or distinction between Choir Sisters (ladies) and Lay Sisters (not ladies), and where to draw the line. The author of the 'Papers' noted that in many Roman Catholic communities in France, candidates who paid a dowry become Choir Sisters, but those who did not became Lay Sisters. Alternatively, also in France, the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, a Mercy order, had one grade of membership, but would not accept postulants from ranks below the 'respectable lower middle classes'.<sup>41</sup>

The idea of the two-tier system, which dates from the eleventh century, was originally to provide an entrée to the religious life for those who were unqualified for it through illiteracy, or lack of education or intelligence. Lay Sisters performed the heavy work and household tasks of a community, leaving Choir Sisters free for more important or more skilled work and canonical duties. Margaret Goodman recorded that a Sister of Mercy's household matters were all arranged for her, therefore she was 'free to think and work for others alone.'<sup>42</sup> The 'Papers' author recommended that Lay Sisters were not to be selected from below the social grade of, for example, nursery governess or confidential



lady's maid, in other words from the classes that were trained not only to be useful to their superiors and to defer to them, but who might reasonable be expected to be trustworthy. Lay Sisters were generally excluded from Chapter and therefore had no say in the running of the community. Alternatively, the 'Papers' author suggested that new or small communities should have one grade of Sister, but employ servants for household tasks, 'not as a matter of pride and luxury, but of economy of power, by not setting people who are capable of higher things to perform mere unskilled labour.'<sup>43</sup>

A further alternative was the single order system which did away with class distinctions and which fulfilled Gospel teaching as to non-discrimination within Christianity. To admit class distinctions into Sisterhoods,

would seem to import one of the least admirable features of worldliness, one of the chief hindrances to the realisation of the brotherhood of humanity, into just the very place where unworldliness ought to prevail, where the sense of equality and fellowship in Christ ought to be most highly developed.<sup>44</sup>

However, the 'Papers' author goes on to argue in favour of some sort of discrimination as necessary to the efficient running and moral tone of a community. Uneducated or underbred Sisters would not only be at a disadvantage but might possibly represent a hindrance if asked to carry out work for which they were ill-equipped.

And there is a further risk, not at first so obvious, namely, that to lift women of this stamp, say of the peasant or domestic-servant grade, out of their original rank and surroundings, and to make them the equals and intimates of well-born, high-bred, and cultivated ladies, instead of producing, as might be hoped, a softening, refining, and elevating effect upon themselves, is much more apt to turn their heads, to make them pushing and overbearing, and above all, to inflate them with spiritual pride, which is at once destructive of the true character of the Religious Life in any form.<sup>45</sup>

The 'Papers' author considers it dangerous to allow women of low understanding to have a voice in Chapter, as they would be entitled to in a single-order community, therefore having a potentially harmful influence on the running of the community. It is also implied that women of the 'peasant or domestic servant grade' lacked the self-control of ladies, that they might allow their emotions, particularly pride, to dominate their behaviour. Not having the benefit of a proper upbringing, they might be incapable of realising that, not only was self-



control necessary for the well-being of the community, but that self-control was the basis of the good manners and consideration that the 'Papers' author considered essential in an ideal postulant.

The idea that lower-class women might not be 'elevated' by the refining influence of their betters is contrary to the school of thought that held that the innate purity and moral superiority of ladies enabled them to wield a positive influence over their inferiors. Margaret Goodman, commenting on the penitentiary work of the Convent of the Good Shepherd, a Roman Catholic community, considered the example of the Sisters to be the formative element in the reforming of women of vicious tendencies:

In the Convent of the Good Shepherd, at Hammersmith, the Sisters mingle with the penitents in every occupation: thus, besides checking by their presence everything improper, the constant example, never from before their eyes, of the walk and conversation of pure, gentle, educated and self-controlled women must be a most important element in the raising of a vitiated mind and character.<sup>46</sup>

It would seem that the lower class or ill-educated mind had to be slowly elevated by long example and could not be expected to adapt quickly to the level of refinement required by a successful Sisterhood. However, it could be argued that letting lower-class women to associate as equals with their social superiors allowed them to import their own values and standards and impose them on their companions to the moral detriment of the community. Lower-class women were more likely to learn from, and be improved by, the example of those they regarded as superior than those they considered as equals.

Two women who illustrated between them some of the requirements and issues involved in joining a Sisterhood were Sister Dora of the Christ Church Sisterhood, Coatham (which became the Community of the Holy Rood, Middlesborough), and Sister Zillah of the Society of St Margaret, East Grinstead. In addition, the family difficulties experienced by Florence Nightingale in pursuing her vocation bear striking similarities to those encountered by some would-be Sisters.

Sister Dora's life has been extensively recorded, and the circumstances of her joining a Sisterhood, although dramatic are not untypical in essentials. Born Dorothy Pattison, the sister of Mark Pattison, she was the daughter of an Evangelical clergyman with a living in a remote part of North Yorkshire. Mark Pattison was much influenced by Pusey and Newman during the formative years of the Oxford Movement, and in turn influenced his sisters, who



followed the instruction he gave them long after he had moved on to other things. They met with strong opposition from their father, who was given to violent bouts of temporary insanity, and religious differences seem to have led to increasingly unpleasant and bizarre behaviour on his part. He refused to let his daughters leave home, disinheriting those that married and frequently refusing to give their allowances to those still at home so that they were dependent on the charity of neighbours and family for necessities such as clothes. It was not until she was 30, after she came into a small inheritance on her mother's death, that Dorothy went to work as an elementary school teacher, a post not considered suitable for a lady. Three years later she and her sister Fanny, who had previously suffered a nervous breakdown, became postulants at the Christ Church Sisterhood, a move disapproved of deeply by the rest of their family.<sup>47</sup> Although Fanny went on to become a fully professed member of the community and was voted Superior in 1885, Dorothy chose to remain a novice for the rest of her life.

The Christ Church Sisterhood did not take vows of poverty and chastity but they did take a vow of obedience. The small income that Dorothy and Frances had inherited from their mother was paid as a contribution to household expenses but as it barely covered these they were subsidised by the community. Financial constraints also meant they were unable to afford to take a month's holiday every year as set out in the community's constitution. The Christ Church Sisterhood was a two-tier community but although Choir Sisters were expected to do heavy manual work - it was a rule of the community that all novices should be thoroughly trained in domestic duties - Lay Sisters waited on them and seemed to have acted almost as parlourmaids. The community's constitution did not allow for Chapters and all decisions were made by the Mother Founder. The day hours of the Church of England were followed which meant that a normal working day started at six-fifteen with Prime and meditation. This was followed by Holy Communion at seven and Terce after breakfast, Sext at noon, Nones at three, Vespers at five forty-five and Compline at eight. Between services the community's work in its hospital, convalescent home and orphanage was carried out.

It would seem that Mother Theresa, the Mother Foundress of the Christ Church community, was acting contrary to some of the precepts of the 'Papers' author. Although Dorothy and Fanny were undoubtedly ladies, at forty-five Fanny might have been considered too old for the heavy duties involved in the community's work (she eventually worked in the orphanage). In addition, not only did she have a personal history of mental



instability, but there was insanity in the Pattison family. The opposition of their family might also have been considered an obstacle, although this was based, not so much on religious grounds, but on the fact that their sisters considered that Fanny and Dorothy were demeaning themselves by performing manual work. Soon after Fanny and Dorothy joined the community their sisters wrote to friends:

It is painful to imagine the high-born lady reduced to a toil the poorest drudge in the land could have accomplished.<sup>48</sup>

If the Pattison family considered that Dora and Fanny were losing caste, others regarded Sisters differently. When the Walsall hospital committee was setting up its new Cottage Hospital in 1863 one of their main problems was finding suitable nurses: 'Where in Walsall can you find ladies?'<sup>49</sup> Nightingale's work in the Crimea, and subsequent reforms in the training of nurses, had laid stress not only on the importance of obedience, discipline and hygiene, but on the necessity of high moral standards for nurses. Nightingale's belief that only ladies could reach the standards she set, and that ladies should lead in attaining these standards, had been disseminated throughout the medical profession by the mid-1860s: 'Strong-willed upper-middle-class women, a tiny but influential minority, set the tone and the standards of the profession.'<sup>50</sup>

The Walsall hospital committee applied to the Christ Church Sisterhood, which had built up a reputation for its nursing, and in 1865 Sister Dora and an Associate Sister were sent to the Walsall Cottage Hospital. It was an area of high Irish immigration and consequent suspicion of anything that might be deemed to have Roman Catholic tendencies. In 1867, William Murphy, the notorious anti-Roman Catholic 'lecturer' attracted large crowds at nearby Wolverhampton and Birmingham which resulted in rioting and the calling out of the militia to restore order.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, when the Sisters went about Walsall dressed in distinctive black cloaks and veils they were frequently the victims of stone throwing, on the grounds that they were 'co-workers in the great work of getting the British nation back into the arms of the Pope.'<sup>52</sup> This was despite the hospital committee's opinion, and the generally held belief amongst supporters of Sisterhoods that:

Were they to be seen in some of the places to which their duties called them dressed in fashionable attire ... they would be liable to insult. Hence the need



for the simple dress which to some has been a stumbling block, but to the Sisters a protection.<sup>53</sup>

Sister Dora ran the Walsall Hospital until her death in 1878 and achieved a degree of fame as an innovator in the field of accident and surgical nursing, and also a degree of notoriety. The latter was prompted by a story that was circulated amongst Evangelicals that the Sisterhood refused her permission to go to her father's deathbed (she did not go, but the reasons are not clear) thereby proving that Sisterhoods forcibly separated their members from family affections.<sup>54</sup> Stories of her life, featuring this incident, were apparently given as prizes in Low Church Sunday Schools, presumably to warn against the dangers of Sisterhoods.<sup>55</sup> It has also been suggested that, given Mark Pattison's association with George Eliot, Sister Dora may have served as a model for Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch (1872), as her brother is supposed by some to have inspired Mr Casaubon.<sup>56</sup>

Although Sister Dora had no qualms about quitting her family as soon as she was financially able, duty versus vocation was a moral problem which haunted Florence Nightingale for many years. Unlike Marian Hughes, who was content to forgo joining the first Anglican Sisterhood at Park Village West because of family ties, and who founded her own community after the deaths of her elderly parents, Nightingale was frustrated and confused by the emotional and social restrictions imposed on her by her family. Having done some amateur nursing she proposed in December 1845 to undertake three months' training at Salisbury Infirmary, not far from her parents' country home, where a family friend was head physician. Despite the security of proximity to home and the safeguard of respectability offered by the guardianship of a valued friend, her parents were adamant in their opposition. Writing to a friend, 11 December 1845, Nightingale noted:

But there have been difficulties about my very first step, which terrified Mama. I do not mean the physically revolting parts of a hospital, but things about the surgeons and nurses which you may guess.<sup>57</sup>

Mama was not then primarily concerned about physical dangers which might be encountered by Nightingale, who was then aged 25, but about the moral danger inherent in coming into close contact with lower class women (before Nightingale's reforms hospital nurses seem to have been mainly recruited from the servant classes) and upper class men working together. The danger was of course intensified by the low reputation of hospital



nurses at this time, and although this seems to have been based on a predisposition to alcohol rather than to sexual licence, the tendency of the former to lead to the latter could not be ignored.<sup>58</sup> It was also accepted that lower class women were fair game for sexually predatory upper class men.<sup>59</sup> Like members of a Sisterhood who performed menial tasks, Nightingale was in danger of demeaning herself before men of her own class, of signalling sexual availability rather than marriageability. Significantly, some years later, when Nightingale was offered the superintendency of the Institution for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances, family friends circulated a rumour that she was 'going into service', that she was allying herself with the ambiguous position of the hospital nurse. On this occasion her family supported her and quashed the rumour.

On trips abroad, however, Nightingale permitted herself to deviate from her parents' wishes sufficiently to spend time in a convent<sup>60</sup> during a visit to Rome in 1848, and to associate with the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul in Alexandria in 1850.<sup>61</sup> Later in the same trip she spent some time at the Kaiserswerth Deaconesses Institute in Germany which had a hospital with an excellent reputation for training nurses. The Institute had been founded by a Lutheran minister, Pastor Fliedner, and in addition to the hospital consisted of a school, a penitentiary and a nursing home, all run by Lutheran deaconesses under the direction of the Pastor or, following his death, his widow and son-in-law. Nightingale's visit brought her into direct conflict with her mother, probably not for religious reasons - Nightingale's parents had converted to Anglicanism from Unitarianism and appear to have been dutiful rather than dedicated church people - but because the visit seemed dangerously close to an assertion of independence. However, the following year, she gained reluctant consent, aged 31, to spend a longer period there.

The struggle to assert some degree of independence of thought and action was accompanied by an intense emotional struggle as to the morality of breaking free (even in a very small way) from her family. In 1852, she wrote to Henry Manning:

I am blamed by every body, most of all by themselves "for seeking duty away from the sphere in which it has pleased God to place me."<sup>62</sup>

She herself was convinced that, while in Rome, she had a direct revelation from God that she was to surrender her will completely to Him.<sup>63</sup> Once she had made the initial step of getting the job at the Gentlewomen's Institute, and once her family had given tacit approval



of this,<sup>64</sup> she seems to have considered herself a free agent and in 1853 spent some time at the *Maison de la Providence (Soeurs de Charité)* in Paris without her parents' knowledge.

At the age of 33 Nightingale's family released her from the moral and emotional blackmail which obliged her to defer to their wishes. This would have been in line with Penelope Holland's assertion that most unmarried women were their own mistresses after thirty, when they were considered ineligible<sup>65</sup>, but was also perhaps partly due to the satisfying of Nightingale family pride by the marriage of Florence's sister, Parthenope, to a baronet (albeit elderly and widowed).<sup>66</sup>

The emphasis on duty and discipline and the absolute obedience to ordained authority insisted upon by Anglo-Catholic doctrine was an extension of the values of the Victorian family, hence perhaps the insistence by the 'Papers' author on family duties coming first. Problems arose when they were dedicated outside the family, particularly when loyalties were transferred from the male head of the family to a female substitute. The average age of choir profession (33), the same at which Nightingale was able to assert her independence from her family, raises the issue of whether women were only valued in their family while they were capable of marriage, and that after a certain age there was a tendency to let them go their own way.

The age of 30 as the age of liberty and personal choice was not confined to the Established Church. In 1854, inspired by Nightingale's example, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to her friend Emily Shaen that she would be willing to let her daughter Margaret take up nursing in the future:

I have told Meta she may begin to prepare herself for entering upon a nurse's life of devotion when she is thirty or so, by going about among sick now, and that all the help I can give in letting her see hospitals, etc., if she wishes she may have.<sup>67</sup>

Following a disappointed engagement, and with her mother's encouragement, Meta became very active in working for the poor in Manchester, particularly during the 'Cotton Famine' in the early 1860s. Poor health, however, seems to have prevented her following this up with any formal training.

In contrast to the careers of Nightingale and Sister Dora, that of Sister Zillah was an example of a pattern daughter and Sister. She was born Georgianna Mary Townsend and her father was a King-at-Arms of the Herald's Office with strong associations with the



clergy at St Paul's Cathedral. Her mother and her aunt ran a boarding house for the Merchant Taylor's School and Georgianna helped her aunt to do this after the death of her mother. When her aunt became blind she virtually ran the house herself. She became an Associate of St Margaret's in 1858, and, following the death of her aunt, considered herself free to join the community in 1861 where she assumed the name of Sister Zillah (her mother's name). That her family approved of this step is evidenced by that fact that while still an Associate she gave ten 'fair-sized' pearls to the community's Oratory, a gift to her father from the 'Emperor of Russia'.<sup>68</sup>

Immediately on joining the community she was sent out to nurse locally, and in 1862 went to work in a parish in Aberdeen doing the groundwork for the community's daughter house there which started the following year. In 1865 she became the head of the temporary scarlet fever military hospital at Aldershot. She was, however, most closely associated with the Newport Market Refuge in Soho where she managed the women's ward for twenty-two years. The Refuge was started in 1864 by the Tractarian vicar of St Mary's, Soho, as a night shelter for the more respectable of those turned away by the workhouse of St Martin's-in-the-Fields. With donations from supporters, including Mr and Mrs Gladstone, a disused slaughterhouse in Newport Market was converted into a night shelter for:

Homeless Men, Women and Children, who, after being carefully scrutinized and questioned, were admitted to the advantages of seven nights' rough lodging, a homely supper and breakfast of six ounces of dry bread and a mug of coffee, and were thus stimulated to seek employment during the day.<sup>69</sup>

The Refuge also operated an employment agency for its occupants, and later started an Industrial School for 'destitute lads'.

The managing committee asked St Margaret's to be responsible for the women's department, and in 1866 Sister Zillah was sent to be in charge, and acquired for herself, and for her community, a little quiet celebrity. In 1888 her health broke down and she returned to East Grinstead where she was Guest Mistress until her death eight years later.

Given the high profile nature of some of its supporters (Mrs Gladstone used to play the harmonium at the services in the women's ward) the Refuge was occasionally the object of public scrutiny. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, in an article, 'Chirping Crickets', in the Cornhill Magazine, 1869, described a visit to the Refuge and its work:



Here, in the Newport Refuge, many get helped, one way and another. Trouble and time are given ungrudgingly by the committee, by the people upon the establishment, and by the kindest of sisters, in her nice grey dress and white cap.<sup>70</sup>

The sister's 'nice grey dress and white cap' give an impression of neatness (nice being here used in the sense of neat or precise) and cleanliness with their associations of respectability and moral superiority.

Ritchie describes the work going on in the Refuge, particularly the boys who were training as tailors, cobblers or learning musical instruments in preparation for being bandsmen in the army. The 'sister' is obviously Sister Zillah and although Ritchie finds her kind and sympathetic, she does not mention that she is from an Anglican sisterhood. This is indicated, however, by references to her throughout as 'the sister' and descriptions of her dress as 'a quaint grey gown' (quaint because, although it does not appear to have been a habit, she would not have worn a crinoline), and there seems to be an assumption that she belongs to an order.<sup>71</sup>

An article in Macmillan's, February 1869, by Agnes T Harrison, 'Two Girls of the Period. The Under Side', describes how an unemployed glovemaker from Norwich, lost in London in search of her brother, was helped by the Newport Refuge. Found wandering in Beckenham, the girl acquired a benefactress in Harrison, who took her home, gave her money to find other relatives in London, and eventually took her to the Refuge while trying to find a permanent home for her. The article emphasises the willingness of other women to help the girl, Sarah; not only women of Harrison's class, but also their servants. Harrison's stresses the co-operation that existed between homes and refuges of different denominations. Part of the willingness to help Sarah seems to have been prompted by the fact that she is respectable and eager to work. Her cleanliness is also emphasised - she appreciates a bath and clean clothing, and, later, before meeting her benefactress she washes her hands and face and combs her hair. At the end of the article she is placed in an Industrial School to be trained as a domestic servant with the promise of a job from a dinner party acquaintance of Harrison's.

Harrison describes the Refuge and its work, and the role of 'Sister Priscilla' (Sister Zillah) - 'brisk' and 'business-like' in a 'long grey dress and spotless linen cap'.<sup>72</sup> In common with the other women who help Sarah she is compassionate and humane:

All honour to the love and courage of the heart that, forsaking the ease and refinements of life, could thus cast in its lot with the poor and miserable, and in the midst of the dreariness of London poverty shed around it through womanly love and sympathy a light which shows to these desolate hearts something of the lost Eden - home.

Harrison acknowledges here that Sister Zillah is a lady who has, superficially at least, abandoned caste to help those less fortunate than herself. However, she has not lost her inherent femininity and domesticity, still having the ability to make a home for those who do not have one.

Although, like Ritchie, Harrison stresses the inherent worth and willingness to work of the applicants to the Refuge, Sister Zillah warns that because of the nature of the admissions system there is necessarily the potential for moral contamination:

"I can make no discrimination as to character here," she said. "I take in those whose simple claim is their being homeless and miserable, and there must necessarily be here companionship which is injurious to a girl such as Sarah."<sup>73</sup>

Despite Sarah's physical cleanliness, and Sister Zillah's own spotlessness, there is still the danger of moral contamination at the Refuge. This is in contrast to part of Ritchie's 'Chirping Crickets' article where she describes the effect a stay in a children's hospital has on slum children:

"It is not only that the children are generally cured when they come here," said Miss S-, "but they learn things which they never forget. They are taught little prayers; they get notions of order and cleanliness. One little girl said she should go home and teach the others all she had learnt."<sup>74</sup>

The influence of lady nurses has a beneficial effect on both the moral and physical ideas of the slum children, but that of women of her own class might possibly degrade Sarah, whose story, then, is one of moral as well as social redemption.

Representations of Anglican Sisterhood's work in mainstream periodicals were generally positive, accounts of conventual life, however tended to be more negative or wary. The following two articles - the first by Elizabeth Sewell, a dedicated Anglo-Catholic, and the second by Anne Ritchie, an Anglican - demonstrate a basic distrust of Roman orders and



offer a warning to Anglican communities to avoid the pitfalls of being too imitative of Rome.

'Kaiserswerth and the Protestant Deaconesses', by Elizabeth Sewell, in Macmillan's Magazine, 1870, deals with the Lutheran institution best known to Macmillan's readers as the place where Florence Nightingale went to learn about nursing. Sewell's account would seem coloured by both a personal distaste for the Lutheran church and by an awareness of the current proceedings of the Parliamentary Committee enquiring into monastic and conventual institutions. The enquiry was prompted partly by the notoriety of the Saurin v Starr case and partly by the continuing efforts of Charles Newdegate who associated the fact that both Roman and Anglican communities avoided publicity with a desire for secrecy and drew the conclusion that they had something to hide.<sup>75</sup> Sewell notes, for example, that there is 'not the slightest difficulty' in entering the Institution and being given a tour.<sup>76</sup> She is not allowed to see the rules of the community but comments:

This was the only symptom of anything in the slightest degree approaching to secrecy or reserve that we could remark in the arrangement of the Institution.<sup>77</sup>

Charles Newdegate was not alone in regarding conventual institutions as secretive, and Sewell pointed out that Kaiserswerth was free from this and other perceived Roman faults, such as a consciousness of spiritual superiority.<sup>78</sup> In fact, she stressed that 'the "Protestant Deaconesses" were in no way conventual', taking no vows, only promising obedience to the Institution's rules for five years. In this way they avoided the contentious issues of vows of poverty and chastity which were to dog Anglican communities until the end of the nineteenth century. The Kaiserswerth Sisters did not wear a habit, but a uniform of 'dark blue close-fitting cotton gown with tight sleeves, a plain white collar, and a small white cap with a net border round the face, the effect being of refined neatness and simplicity', as opposed, presumably, to the picturesque and faux mediaeval habits of Roman Catholic nuns.<sup>79</sup> The Kaiserswerth uniform bears a close resemblance, in its 'neatness and simplicity' to the outfit worn by Sister Zillah in the articles by Ritchie and Harrison.

Sewell was also not allowed to see the Hospital for Insane Ladies, which catered for about thirty educated, potentially curable, insane women, but was permitted to observe the women in the Penitentiary. No reason is given for not being able to see the former, but presumably the refusal was based on class-related grounds - that ladies temporarily disabled



should not be embarrassed by being the objects of public curiosity. The women in the Penitentiary, on the other hand, might be considered hardened to the stares of strangers. Sewell observed that the Sister's greeting to a penitent 'was as loving as though they had been on a footing of perfect moral equality'.<sup>80</sup> However, on enquiring how 'discipline was maintained amongst such undisciplined natures' Sewell was told that they were never allowed to do anything without a Sister in attendance. This was of course a great similarity between the culture of surveillance that was supposed to exist in Roman Catholic convents where sisters were encouraged to watch each other and note down spiritual failings. In Villette (1853), for example, the inmates of Mme Beck's school (which is portrayed using popular anti-conventual imagery) are kept under control by systematic observance 'As Madame Beck ruled by espionage, she of course had her staff of spies' ... "Surveillance", "espionage,"- these were her watch-words.'<sup>81</sup> Mother Starr, at the Hull Sisters of Mercy, had asked Miss Saurin's fellow Sisters to make reports on her peculiarities and misdemeanours.

The Kaiserswerth Sisters were sent from Germany all over the world as far afield as North America, Constantinople and Alexandria, treating patients of any religion equally: a tacit reference to what were believed to be the proselytising tendencies of Roman Catholics.<sup>82</sup> Sewell attributed their success to the fact that their sole object was the carrying out of charitable works, rather the spreading of their own denominational doctrines. The Kaiserswerth Sisters also did not seem to regard their work as primarily furthering their own spiritual advancement - a belief popularly attributed to Roman Catholic nuns.

Finally, Sewell discoursed on the dangers of imbuing one individual with too much power as illustrated in the recent Saurin v Starr case. Although Kaiserswerth was run by its founder's widow and her son-in-law, there was provision made for regular conferences with representation from branch houses. Sewell also includes the example of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul who were bound by the laws of their society and not by the will of an individual Superior. She saw in this an example for Anglican Sisterhoods to avoid the 'opportunity for the undue exercise of that love of power which is such a temptation to many, and especially to women.'<sup>83</sup> She may here have been thinking, not only of the behaviour of Mother Starr, but also of the absolute control wielded over her community by Miss Sellon. By presenting the Kaiserswerth Institution as an ideal of an almost-conventual charitable organisation, and by highlighting as positive those aspects which most countered Roman Catholic influence, Sewell offered a model for Anglican Sisterhoods.



Anne Thackeray Ritchie's article, 'A House in Westminster', in the Cornhill Magazine, 1862, deals with the work of the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul. These Sisters did not take perpetual vows, but, like Anglican Sisterhoods, renewed their vows every year, thus making them more acceptable to Ritchie, who exhibited an uneasy anti-Catholicism. Ritchie's article concerns a visit to the Sisters in Westminster where they lived amongst some of the worst and most violent slums, 'in the midst of crime, and dirt, and poverty, and evil speaking, these good, gentle, silent, white-capped sisters have taken up their abode.'<sup>84</sup> It was an area that most charity visitors chose to visit when they knew the men would be absent and the risk of insult or assault lessened. Such was the influence of the Sisters, however, that they were able to achieve much good with the assistance of the people who lived there:

But into this brawling grimy land the quiet sisters pass without fear or hesitation [...] they enter the houses; they stand by the sick patients; people send for them, and they come. No one harms them, and the men themselves, instead of ill-treating, respect them and help them in every way.<sup>85</sup>

The Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, as noted earlier, only accepted postulants from the respectable *petite bourgeoisie* or above so that they were guaranteed to be of good family. Their influence is therefore not just spiritual but also social, the inherent morality of ladies communicating itself to the dirty and the criminal and inspiring respect. The 'superioress' defied expectations;

She was young, with a charming unaffected manner, speaking very pretty English, and not at all coming up to our orthodox Protestant idea of what a superior should be. Somebody has since told me that she was one of the *Soeurs de Charité* who did such good service in the Crimea.<sup>86</sup>

The Superior is not, then, like her fictional sisters in religion such as the Abbess of St Ignatia in Catherine Sinclair's virulently anti-Catholic novel Beatrice (1854), or her real-life counterpart, the Anglican Miss Sellon. The Sisters ran a nursery, one Sister caring for thirteen or more toddlers and babies, and, like, Dinah Mulock Craik, Ritchie found something pitiable in the sight of voluntarily childless women caring for children, 'Is there any more pretty, more sad, more pathetic sight to be seen?'<sup>87</sup> She sentimentalized the Sisters' work with children, stressing their kindness, and their relationship to the children

they looked after. The article implied that the Sisters' lives would be incomplete without families of their own, that they could not be completely fulfilled emotionally, and that the children are a substitute for those they would never have themselves.

Finally Ritchie looked at the work of the Anglican deaconesses in Burton Crescent and compared it with that of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, then compared the active work of both with the enclosed and passive life of a Poor Clare Colettine. The Poor Clares were an enclosed order who led a life of almost 24-hour constant prayer and meditation, eating very little and only allowing themselves to recline when they slept rather than lying down properly. Although praising the work of the former and condemning what she sees as the artificial and unproductive life of the latter, Ritchie, like Penelope Holland, still wished that good works could be free of any trappings of conventualism. (Gaskell, by contrast, saw the discipline of a Poor Clare community as having a salutary effect on the wild and passionate Bridget Fitzgerald in her short story The Poor Clare, 1859.)

Objections to the conventual life of Anglican Sisterhoods, as opposed to the work they did, might roughly be categorized as moral prejudice on one hand and fear of spiritual perversion on the other. If Sister Dora's family felt that she and Fanny were demeaning themselves socially by performing heavy household tasks, then there was also the notion that they were morally wrong in this, that they were deliberately stepping away from the social position in which God had seen fit to place them. Mrs F Cecil Alexander summed up this attitude in her famous hymn:

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.<sup>88</sup>

It was also questioned whether there was Scriptural authority for unmarried women to leave their families and form communities, with both sides of the debate claiming holy sanction. The issue of celibacy raised similar problems - was there any authority in the Bible for women to refuse to marry and bear children? There was uneasiness, too, about whether women were capable of leadership, and about whether one woman should have authority over others. This was a major issue in the Saurin v Starr case, hence Elizabeth's Sewell's emphasis on the need, not only for democracy and regular meetings of Chapter, in



Sisterhoods, but also for a Rule which no Sister or Mother Superior could consider herself above.

Spiritual danger rested in the fact that Anglican Sisterhoods were seen as imitative of Roman Catholic orders, most obviously in matters of dress and ritual, with an attendant fear that Sisters, despite the outward appearance of humbling themselves, might exchange worldly social status for an inward conviction of spiritual superiority to those outside their order. More harmful, potentially, were the concepts of absolute obedience and discipline. It was perhaps unfortunate for the Sisterhood movement that its most high-profile Superior and Mother Foundress was also one of its more colourful. Miss Sellon had no problem with the idea of her Sisters owing her absolute obedience and no hesitation in enforcing whatever penances she deemed appropriate. In this she was supported by her friend and mentor Dr Pusey whose predilection for asceticism, including hairshirts and fasting, was legendary. In 1849 the Rev Mr Spurrell accused her of forcing a Sister to lie face down in the chapel and make the sign of the cross on the floor with her tongue. Miss Sellon dismissed his accusation by pointing out that the penance had been carried out in private and that she saw no objection to this.<sup>89</sup> Margaret Goodman observed that, not having lived under discipline herself, Miss Sellon had no idea how to impose it, and that she did not mix with her Sisters enough to realise how oppressive some of the measures she imposed were.<sup>90</sup>

The qualified approval given to the work of Sisterhoods by Sewell and Ritchie is typical of much of the reportage of the 1860s, that is, post-Crimea, when Sisterhoods had been validated to a large extent by their nursing work during the war and had become more generally accepted. It must be remembered that the initial reaction of the more ultra-Protestant public to both Anglican and Roman Catholic sisters going to the Crimea was not so favourable. Catherine Sinclair's opinion was typifies the attitude:

The Author trusts it cannot be true that, with the sanction of Government, Popish 'Sisters of Charity' are going to minister among the British troops at Varna; and that, after facing enemies that can only kill the body, they are to have both body and soul endangered by Popish machinations.<sup>91</sup>

The fear here is that, while nursing, the Roman Catholic Sisters would attempt to convert their patients, and it was also feared that Anglican Sisters would do the same. Elizabeth Gaskell noted concerns about 'Low Church opposition' to a meeting of the Manchester Nightingale Fund, showing that Nightingale was popularly associated with High

Anglicanism and regarded with suspicion by the Low Church for her co-operation with Roman Catholics.<sup>92</sup> Margaret Goodman recorded that before Nightingale's party left for Scutari they were warned by Sidney Herbert (the speaker at the Manchester meeting) before they embarked for the Crimea that 'nuns' (i.e. Roman Catholics) and 'sisters' (Anglicans) were not to attempt conversions.<sup>93</sup> Hence Sewell's insistence that the Kaiserswerth deaconesses did not proselytise in any way.

Both Ritchie and Sewell saw the necessity of the work carried out by Sisterhoods, but were tentative in their endorsements. Sewell's concerns were for the spiritual danger inherent in being too imitative of Roman practices; Ritchie, although describing and praising the work of the Newport Refuge, omits any reference to St Margaret's at all. Also, while reporting favourably on the work of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, points out the unnaturalness of celibacy for women and what she perceives as the peculiarities of some conventual practices. Concerns about aspects of convent and Sisterhood lifestyles, as opposed to their work, voiced by Sewell and Ritchie were brought into focus by the *Saurin v. Starr* case which revealed details of female community life to a public eager to find out what went on behind convent walls.

<sup>1</sup> Owen Chadwick, 2 vols The Victorian Church (London: SCM Press, 1971), vol.1, p.506

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in, John Shelton Reed, Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism (Nashville Tennessee, Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), p.189

<sup>3</sup> Reed, p.203

<sup>4</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, 'Lent in Belgravia', in Re-echoes (London and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1876), p.239

<sup>5</sup> G F A Best, 'Popular Protestantism in Victorian Britain', Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clarke, ed. Robert Robson (London: Bell, 1967), pp.118-126

<sup>6</sup> Cobbe, 'Lent in Belgravia', p.50

<sup>7</sup> The Sister of Mercy; A Tale for the Times We Live In (London, Houlston & Stoneman, 1854)

<sup>8</sup> Cobbe, 'Lent in Belgravia', p.50

<sup>9</sup> Penelope Holland, 'Two Girls of the Period: The Upper Side', Macmillan's, 19 (February 1869), pp.322-331

<sup>10</sup> See 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXX-The Choice of Postulants' in, The Monthly Packet, Vol.30 (July-December 1880), p.140



- <sup>11</sup> Doing the Impossible. A Short Historical Sketch of St Margaret's Convent, East Grinstead 1855-1980, produced by the Society of St Margaret, no author, no publisher, no date.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in, Reed, p.205
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in, Reed, p.200
- <sup>14</sup> Michael Hill, The Religious Order (London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1973), p.299
- <sup>15</sup> Hill, p.299
- <sup>16</sup> Sister Agnes; or, The Captive Nun: A Picture of Conventual Life, by a Clergyman's Widow (London, Seeleys, 1854)
- <sup>17</sup> George Borrow, Lavengro (London, Murray, 1851)
- <sup>18</sup> Hill, p.299
- <sup>19</sup> Of course this did not apply in those Sisterhoods which had been founded by men, e.g. St Margaret's, St John the Baptist.
- <sup>20</sup> Alice Horlock Bennett, Through an Anglican Sisterhood to Rome (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1891), p.12
- <sup>21</sup> Susan Mumm, 'Lady Guerrillas of Philanthropy: Anglican sisterhoods in Victorian England', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1992), p.117
- <sup>22</sup> See Maria Monk (Harper, 1836); William Hogan, Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries (London, Ward & Co, 1851), The Confessional Unmasked (1851), The Nunnery; Or, Popery Exposed in Her Tyranny (London, Nisbet, Hatchard, Seely, 1851)
- <sup>23</sup> The Sister of Mercy, Chap.4
- <sup>24</sup> Maude: or, the Anglican Sister of Mercy, [Augusta Dill] ed. Elizabeth Whately (London, Harrison, 1869), p.18
- <sup>25</sup> W M Colles, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Misery; or, Miss Sellon in the Family (London, Hatchard, 1852), pp.17-18, quoted in Dale A Johnson, Women in English Religion 1700-1925 (New York and Toronto, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983)
- <sup>26</sup> 'RFL', 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXX-The Choice of Postulants'
- <sup>27</sup> Dinah Mulock Craik, On Sisterhoods in Maude, On Sisterhoods, A Woman's Thoughts about Women, ed. Elaine Showalter (London, Pickering & Chatto, 1993), p.47. First published in Longman's Magazine, 1, 1883, pp.303-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Craik, p.53
- <sup>29</sup> Craik, p.55
- <sup>30</sup> Craik, p.54
- <sup>31</sup> Craik, p.51
- <sup>32</sup> Craik, p.55

- 33 Craik, p.48
- 34 Craik, p.49
- 35 Margaret Goodman, Sisterhoods in the Church of England: with Notices of some Charitable Sisterhoods in the Romish Church (London, Smith, Elder, 1863), p.268
- 36 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXX-The Choice of Postulants', p.140
- 37 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXX-The Choice of Postulants', p.141
- 38 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXX-The Choice of Postulants', p.140
- 39 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXXII-Grades of the Community', The Monthly Packet 32, (July-December 1881), p.475
- 40 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXX-The Choice of Postulants', p.143
- 41 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXXII-Grades of the Community', p.476
- 42 Margaret Goodman, Experiences of an English Sister of Mercy (London: 1861), p.44
- 43 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXXII-Grades of the Community', p.479
- 44 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXXII-Grades of the Community', p.477
- 45 'Papers on Sisterhoods. XXXII-Grades of the Community', p.478
- 46 Goodman, p.122
- 47 The above taken from, Jo Manton, Sister Dora (London, Quartet, 1977)
- 48 Quoted in Manton, p.157
- 49 Quoted in Manton, p.167
- 50 Martha Vicinus, Independent Women (London, Virago, 1985), p.96
- 51 See Walter L Arnstein, Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England. Mr Newdegate and the Nuns (Columbia & London, University of Missouri Press, 1982), chap.7
- 52 Manton, p.170
- 53 Quoted in, Manton, p.170
- 54 Claiming that family ties should come before duty to the Sisterhood, Craik, in On Sisterhoods, uses the incident as an example: 'In the heroic life of Sister Dora one is painfully conscious of this, both in herself and in the fact, if it be a fact, that she was prohibited from going to the deathbed of her own father, and sent off to nurse some other person, by order of her Superior.'
- 55 Manton, p.175
- 56 See, Manton, Appendix B. It is not suggested that Sister Dora and George Eliot ever met.
- 57 Ever Yours, Florence Nightingale. Selected Letters ed. by Martha Vicinus and Bea Nergaard, (London, Virago, 1987), p.29



- 58 Anne Summers, Angels and Citizens (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988). Summers asserts that the Sairey Gamp/Betsey Prig type of nurse was a caricature, but the image in the public consciousness seems to have been one of low behaviour.
- 59 Michael Mason, The Making of Victorian Sexuality (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), p.111
- 60 Ever Yours, p.39
- 61 Ever Yours, p.41
- 62 Ever Yours, p.61
- 63 Ever Yours, p.40
- 64 Ever Yours, p.63
- 65 Holland, p.327
- 66 In Mrs Oliphant's For Love and Life (1874), Lady Augusta Thornleigh feels she is compensated for one daughter's work at an Anglican Sisterhood by the marriage of another to the heir to a marquise.
- 67 J A V Chapple & Arthur Pollard, eds, The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), p.320
- 68 The above from 'Sister Zillah', St Margaret's Magazine, Vol.5, pp.53-66
- 69 'Sister Zillah', p.57
- 70 Anne Thackeray Ritchie, 'Chirping Crickets', The Cornhill Magazine 19 (February 1869), p.240
- 71 'Chirping Crickets', p.242
- 72 Agnes T Harrison, 'Two Girls of the Period. The Under Side', Macmillan's Magazine 19 (February 1869), p.336
- 73 Harrison, p.338
- 74 Ritchie, p.236
- 75 In fact, the terms of the inquiry were much narrower than Newdegate had wanted. The Select Committee was 'appointed to inquire into the law respecting Conventual and Monastic Institutions or Societies in Great Britain, and into the terms upon which income, property and estates, belonging to such institutions or Societies, or to Members thereof, are respectively received, held or possessed.' Quoted in, A M Allchin, The Silent Rebellion. Anglican Religious Communities 1845-1900 (London, SCM Press, 1958)
- 76 Elizabeth Sewell, 'Kaiserswerth and the Protestant Deaconesses', Macmillan's Magazine 21, (November 1869-April 1870), p.229
- 77 Sewell, p.234
- 78 Sewell, p.230
- 79 Sewell, p.229
- 80 Sewell, p.233

- 81 Charlotte Bronte, Villette (London: Penguin, 1979), p.136 & 135
- 82 A Kaiserswerth Sister based at Alexandria features in Charlotte M Yonge's The Pillars of the House (1873).
- 83 Sewell, p.136
- 84 Anne Thackeray Ritchie, 'A House in Westminster', The Cornhill Magazine 6, (August 1862), p.260
- 85 Ritchie, p.266
- 86 Ritchie, p.263
- 87 Ritchie, p.262
- 88 Mrs F Cecil Alexander, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' (1848)
- 89 Priscilla Lydia Sellon, Reply to a Tract by the Revd J Spurrell, Vicar of Great Shelford, containing certain charges concerning the Society of the Sisters of Mary of Devonport and Plymouth (London: 1852), p.5
- 90 Margaret Goodman, Experiences, p.12
- 91 Catherine Sinclair, Beatrice, or, The Unknown Relatives (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co, 1854), Preface, p.xxvii
- 92 Gaskell, Letters, p.383
- 93 Goodman, Experiences, Chap.4



### Chapter 3: Sister versus Sisterhood - The Great Convent Case of 1869

*'What really went on in the convent? That was the question, that, from about 1830, increasingly obsessed Protestants ...'*<sup>1</sup>

Anti-Catholic feeling, as G F Best has demonstrated, was supplied with plenty of material to keep it burning in the mid-nineteenth century. Curiosity was fuelled by ultra-Protestant fiction (the 1860 republication of Maria Monk, for example), and pamphlets such as Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries<sup>2</sup> or The Confessional Unmasked.<sup>3</sup> Much of the literature pertaining to convents relied heavily on innuendo (or worse) about the relationships between nuns and priests, imprisonment of unwilling postulants, or sado-masochistic speculation about convent discipline. Anti-Catholic feeling was provoked further by the 'lectures' of William Murphy in the 1860s. Murphy was an Irish convert from Catholicism sponsored by the Protestant Evangelical Mission and Electoral Union. He claimed to demonstrate, amongst other things, 'the Depravity of the PRIESTHOOD and the Immorality of the CONFSSIONAL'. He inevitably attracted much controversy, and his tendency to perform in areas with high Irish-Catholic populations not infrequently resulted in rioting, most notably in Birmingham in 1867.

If there was little known about convents at the end of the 1860s, Catholicism as a whole was still an alien concept for most of England. Although the Roman Catholic population was steadily increasing, it was comprised mostly of working-class Irish immigrants and their families and was largely confined to large cities, such as London, Liverpool and Birmingham. It was still possible for people living in some areas of the country to be unacquainted with any Roman Catholics and to be only aware of Catholicism through pamphlets and stories. As late as the 1880s, Flora Thompson recorded that the inhabitants of a remote Oxfordshire hamlet still regarded Catholicism with ignorance and distrust:

On Catholicism at large, the Lark Rise people looked with contemptuous intolerance, for they regarded it as a kind of heathenism, and what excuse could there be for that in a Christian country? When, early in life, the end house children asked what Roman Catholics were, they were told they were "folks as prays to images", and further inquiries elicited the

information that they also worshipped the Pope, a bad old man, some said in league with the Devil.<sup>4</sup>

There had, however, been a visible lessening of officially-sanctioned discrimination since the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829: Roman Catholic chaplains were allowed in the army and navy and in workhouses, for instance, and in 1866 Catholic MPs were no longer required to take the oath to maintain the Church of England and profess their loyalty. Despite these high-profile measures there was still much prejudice amongst the lower classes, who perceived Irish Catholics as likely to take jobs away from indigenous Protestant workers. The educated classes, too, remained suspicious of Catholicism and were given much to think about in the 1860s, which produced, for example, the Kingsley/Newman controversy in 1864. Charles Kingsley, reviewing Froude's History of England for Macmillan's, accused the Roman Catholic church of condoning untruthfulness when it benefited the church, 'Truth for its own sake, has never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Dr Newman informs us that it need not, and on the whole ought not, to be ...'.<sup>5</sup> A battle by pamphlet ensued which Newman, drawing on reserves of intellectual sophistry, won easily. The *Syllabus Errorum* of Pope Pius IX in the same year, in which the Pope strongly denied that 'the Roman pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself and reach agreement with progress, liberalism and modern civilization' also gave rise to concern.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, although the 'proclamation of the dogmatic infallibility of the sovereign pontiff' was not voted into being by the General Council until July 1870, it was under discussion in the late 1860s. To the more educated observer, perhaps, the Roman Catholic church seemed to be strengthening its grip on its followers by seeking to isolate itself and aggressively reaffirm not only its spiritual but also its temporal superiority. The popular imagination, however, when it considered Catholicism, was firmly grasped by the confessional and the convent, and looked to satiate its curiosity.

In 1869, Protestant prurience seemed about to be satisfied when the Roman Catholic church was rocked by an unprecedented court case in which an ex-Sister of Mercy from Hull sued her convent for £5000 damages, claiming that she had been forced to leave following a malicious and sustained programme of persecution orchestrated by the Mother Superior and Assistant Superior. Presided over by the Lord Chief Justice, the case was the longest ever heard at the time in the court of the Queen's Bench and attracted huge crowds of spectators, at least three-quarters of whom were women. It promised to



be the long-awaited *exposé* but as the case dragged on the disclosures turned out to concern, not amorous priests or novices in chains, but breaches of convent rules and routine. Initially this was regarded as disappointing, however the facts that emerged were eventually re-interpreted by some as sordid and degrading enough to warrant condemnation of conventual life. The case also provided a lever enabling anti-Catholic MPs, notably Charles Newdegate and Sir George Whalley, to obtain the 1870 Parliamentary Inquiry into Roman Catholic and Anglican religious communities. (Many early commentators on the Great Convent Case, as it was christened by Punch, called for public inspection of such institutions.) The case also raised concern about Anglican Sisterhoods, the Catholic convent's 'base counterfeit in the Church of England', which were suspected by some of being dangerously imitative of their Roman counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

The action was brought by a Miss Susan Saurin (Sister Mary Scholastica) against Mrs Starr (Sister Mary Joseph), Superior of the Sisters of Mercy at Hull and Clifford, and Mrs Kennedy<sup>8</sup> (Sister Mary Magdalen), Mother Assistant.<sup>9</sup> The defendants were charged with conspiring to force Miss Saurin to leave the convent, enforcing imprisonment, and deprivation of food and clothing; preventing Miss Saurin from attending religious services and libelling her to Bishop Cornthwaite, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Beverley. They counter-claimed that Miss Saurin had no true vocation, that she neglected her duties, secular and spiritual, and that she was a disruptive influence within the community. It was also alleged that she became very excited and particular in her attentions to the priests who came to say Mass and hear confession. Furthermore, they claimed that the Bishop had absolved her from her vows and she had therefore not been a member of the community for much of the time of her complaint.<sup>10</sup>

The story of how an entire convent ended up in court has to be disentangled from a web of accusation and counter-accusation, but would appear to have originated in Mrs Starr's antipathy towards Miss Saurin. They had originally been novices together at Baggot Street, Dublin, and by all accounts had been friends. In 1855, the priest in charge of the Roman Catholic mission in Clifford, West Yorkshire, made a request to Mother Vincent Whitty for sisters to run his schools. Her response was to send nine sisters: five professed nuns (including Saurin, Starr and Kennedy), two novices, a lay-sister and a postulant. Starr was appointed Superior, despite her relative youth and inexperience (she was twenty-five and had been a professed nun for only two years), and Julia Kennedy, who had entered Baggot Street some months after Saurin, was appointed Mother



Assistant and Bursar. Starr was to display an increasingly autocratic perception of the obedience owed to her by the nuns under her control, and in 1861 demanded that Saurin tell her what she had said to the priest in confession. Saurin refused and claimed that their relationship then deteriorated rapidly, aggravated by Starr's apparent dislike of Saurin's family who were from Duleek, Co. Meeth, and seem to have been both wealthy and well-connected with some influence in the church. Two of Saurin's sisters were Carmelites, a brother was a Jesuit, and an uncle, Fr. Tom Mathews, was priest-in-charge, St. Mary's, Drogheda. According to Marie McClelland, Saurin's family was originally opposed to her going to Clifford, but were mollified by a promise from Archbishop Cullen of Dublin that she could return whenever she liked.<sup>11</sup> Once in England, apparently, Mother Starr announced that, as she was out of the archbishop's jurisdiction she was no longer answerable to him and his promise was not honoured. Saurin returned to Ireland once in 11 years, in 1860, when she was so shabbily dressed that the Baggot Street nuns made her a present of a new habit. Starr was a convert to Catholicism and jealousy of Saurin's connections in the church may have influenced her attitude towards her: certainly her subsequent treatment of Saurin contributed greatly towards rewriting public opinion of convent life.

Starr subjected Saurin to a rigid and minute system of rules, so much so that a Catholic observer remarked that it would have been impossible for her not to break some of them, and then punished her for breaching convent discipline.<sup>12</sup> It was noted at the trial that these rules applied only to Miss Saurin, and that her fellow nuns connived at Mrs Starr's regime. Indeed, Mrs Starr ordered the other nuns to watch Miss Saurin closely and make written reports about any failings. To the majority of those following the trial, unacquainted with the concept of absolute and unquestioning obedience, Saurin's offences must have seemed trivial and her penances bizarre. For not dusting the convent parlour furniture properly she was made to wear a damp and dirty duster on her head even in chapel; for borrowing a pair of Mrs Kennedy's boots without permission she was made to wear the boots around her neck; for arriving late for chapel she was made to kiss the floor; when she declined to eat mutton because it made her ill, she was given nothing but mutton every day for several weeks. She was also not permitted to sit while teaching at the schools run by the convent, although other sisters were. Other misdemeanours included burning a candle in her room outside the permitted hours, eating strawberries and other fruit in the convent garden, and doing laundry on a non-laundry day.



Deeming her unfit for the religious life, Starr recommended that Saurin leave the convent, suggesting a transfer back to Baggot Street or to a mercy house recently built by Saurin's uncle at Drogheda. A transfer at this stage would not necessarily have attached any disgrace to Saurin, but she did not wish to go so Starr continued to make her life uncomfortable. She intercepted Saurin's letters and although this was consistent with convent rules, Saurin was to claim that many letters from her family were withheld so that she did not know that one of her brothers had died until some weeks after the event, nor that her father was seriously ill. Mrs Starr also refused permission for Miss Saurin's family to visit her as often as they would have liked, and censored any of her letters which she deemed too affectionately worded. At the trial she defended this on the principle that, '... the natural affections should be moderated and subdued by religious reserve.'<sup>13</sup> Starr accused Saurin of accumulating possessions contrary to her vow of poverty, and on two occasions ordered her to strip to her stays in front of other nuns in the convent parlour so that she could be searched. These possessions were later revealed to be odds and ends of calico, bobbins and a pair of scissors.

After the Bishop had made a dispensation of Miss Saurin's vows, Mrs Starr and Mrs Kennedy removed her habit and ring and gave her a set of secular clothes, 'fitting tight to the skin, like a skeleton suit'.<sup>14</sup> She was denied access to the rest of the community and restricted to an unheated lumber room at the top of the house. At night a rope was attached from the door of her room to the bed of a nun so that her movements might be monitored, food was sent up to her after the others had eaten, and she was frequently denied access to the water closets.

However Saurin steadfastly refused to leave the convent, despite prompting from Starr to do so. Starr had made regular complaints about Saurin to the Bishop, culminating in a threat to resign if she were not removed. The Bishop was also under pressure from Saurin's family about her treatment, and in 1866 convened a commission of inquiry in an effort to settle the matter. Unfortunately, there were major discrepancies between the way the Saurin family were promised the commission would be run and its actual organisation. Miss Saurin was only permitted to answer written accusations from her Superiors and fellow nuns, and not allowed to make counter-accusations. None of the other nuns were called before the commission. The commission found against Miss Saurin, although four of the five commissioners expressed doubts about the convent's conduct. The Bishop ordered her uncle, Fr. Tom Mathew, who had represented her at the commission, to

remove her. He refused on the grounds that the inquiry had been improperly conducted and that to leave the convent under such circumstances would mean utter disgrace, religious and social, for his niece. The affair was again at an impasse and Miss Saurin returned to the lumber room to continue her very odd existence.

Some time after the inquiry Saurin's Jesuit brother, Fr. Matthew Saurin, visited her, and was shocked to find her wretchedly dressed, emaciated and unwell. He arranged for her to see a local physician but this interview was somewhat restricted by the presence of three nuns, who refused to leave Miss Saurin's side during the physician's examination. Shortly after this she left the convent quietly with her brother.

The accusations put forward against the convent in the original depositions to the court certainly reflected some of the elements of anti-Catholic propaganda and fiction. In Catherine Sinclair's fiercely anti-Catholic Beatrice (1854), for example, the nuns in the convent of St Ignatia in Inverness all give the appearance of being malnourished.<sup>15</sup> When Beatrice arrives at the convent, the Mother Superior is 'occupied in opening letters addressed to the nuns and boarders, and in intercepting several which were not to go'.<sup>16</sup> Visiting the convent chapel she discovers that:

One of the nuns was about to be anathematised for eating food when she was ordered to fast, having been detected in the act of devouring raw vegetables, like any hungry animal, in the garden.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, when Beatrice is shown the novices she notices that:

... many among them [were] girls of high and even noble birth, recently perverted, and wasting their time in the most menial offices - brushing shoes, scouring floors, washing plates, darning stockings ...<sup>18</sup>

These girls of 'high and even noble birth', besides performing menial and potentially debasing tasks were required to wash in a communal basin, and use a communal towel and comb. Furthermore, '... the nuns, on alternate days, wear each other's dresses. Thus, what old Sister Martha, a mere mass of disease, wears to-day, Miss Turton must equip herself in to-morrow.'<sup>19</sup>

It was also an accusation against Mrs Star that she refused to supply Miss Saurin with new clothes - hence the gift of a new habit by the Baggot Street Sisters. Dr



O'Hanlon, sitting on the Bishop's commission of inquiry, also commented on her clothes, particularly her stockings:

She made complaint of her clothes [at the inquiry] and in order to test her credibility he asked her to show her stockings, and I must say (continued the rev. doctor) I never saw such things in my life. I really did not know what they were. (Laughter.) I never saw such stockings on any Sister of Mercy, before or since. (Much laughter.)<sup>20</sup>

Even when anti-Catholic literature did not specify exactly what was happening in convents, the inferences made could be applied to the Hull convent. The Nunnery, (1851) an anonymous pamphlet, hints darkly that when a girl became a nun she 'began to experience those miseries which have brought many a true nun to an early grave.'<sup>21</sup> Both The Nunnery and Beatrice contain incidents where a nun is dragged from her bed by the Mother Superior, something which Saurin was to claim happened to her.<sup>22</sup> In Emma Jane Worboise's Overdale, (1869) two women who join an Anglican Sisterhood and Roman Catholic convent respectively are both isolated from their families by these institutions.<sup>23</sup>

Although Miss Saurin does appear to have been victimised, it would seem, looking at the evidence dispassionately, that she was not a satisfactory nun: she was prone to muttering to herself and gossiping with externs, she probably wasn't over-truthful, her time-keeping was erratic, and she had eccentric eating habits, apparently eating little or nothing for days, although her fellow nuns accused her of secret binges in the pantry. She did accumulate odd scraps of things and made herself extra pockets in which to keep them. She would also shut herself in the water closet for long periods of time causing great inconvenience to the rest of the community<sup>24</sup>. Although she came of a good family, the standard of her writing and spelling was poor enough to merit comment by Lord Chief Justice Cockburn during the trial, and might suggest low mental ability. Despite being the second most senior professed sister she was never given a position of real authority within the convent even when she was on good terms with Mrs Starr (who claimed Saurin was a deeply inefficient refectarian) and she may have been deemed incapable of responsibility.

It is possible that her family's objections to Saurin entering a convent, and later to going to England, were founded on the knowledge of some peculiarities of behaviour and a desire to keep an eye on her. She did not, after all, follow the tradition set by her two sisters and enter an enclosed order where contact with her family would be minimal.

One of the more dramatic moments of the trial involved a letter (dated 15 September 1865) from her brother, Fr. Matthew Saurin, to the Bishop claiming that his sister had revealed to him during confession that she had experienced a vision whilst, it was implied, being flogged by Mrs Starr (the letter implies that Miss Saurin was not aware of the identity of her confessor):

I saw my poor darling this morning, and interrogated her under the secrecy of my priestly character, when she revealed a mystery that exceeded all the horrors I ever heard or knew. Her story is equal to anything I saw in the 'Lives of the Saints', and the horrors of which she has been made the victim far surpass anything that has entered the minds of the most fanatical enemies of the convents. "Under one operation, which was repeated four times, I hesitated for a moment," said she, "when Christ, as it were appeared to me bound and stript at the pillar. I raised my eyes to heaven, and the Reverend Mother said, "See how her eyes turn." I thought my body was falling to pieces, and I cried allowed (*sic*) "Yes, my Lord, I will make the sacrifice." When telling me this, my lord, I saw she was falling against me and you may guess what was my struggle and pain to seem unmoved.<sup>25</sup>

Confronted with the suggestion that one of the nuns under his charge had experienced a vision whilst being flogged by her Superior, the bishop expressed surprise:

When I read that letter (said the Bishop) I don't know what idea occurred to my mind it seemed so absurd. I don't know that the idea of scourging occurred to my mind.<sup>26</sup>

Under close questioning from Lord Cockburn, Saurin said that she had been referring to one of the occasions when Starr had forced her to strip, but her answers were equivocal and she appeared shifty:

What did that mean?- My Lord, it meant the stripping, when I was ordered by the Mother Superior.

The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE - Oh, that is what your brother speaks of?- I believe it to be so, my Lord; but I had never heard the letter before this trial.

The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE - Well, you hear it now; and I ask you what had you told your brother about it? Did you tell him that you saw Christ stripped and bound at the pillar?- No, my Lord



The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE - Then that is all his invention?- No, my Lord.

Did you tell him that or not?- My Lord, I said that I was dreadfully shocked when she asked me to take off my clothes, and that I thought of Christ, and remembered all he suffered when bound and stripped at the pillar.

Did you say that to him?- Yes, my Lord.

Do you mean to tell me that without telling him more than that, he wrote this letter?- I told him all I had suffered and had been obliged to submit to. But about the stripping, no more than you have mentioned?- No, my Lord.<sup>27</sup>

Fr. Porter,<sup>28</sup> who sat on the commission of inquiry, claimed that he was, '... drawn strongly to the opinion that morally and intellectually she was warped'.<sup>29</sup>

It might appear that the Great Convent Case was simply the result of poor middle-management skills, of the failure of Mother Starr to identify a weakness in her community and deal with it appropriately and efficiently. This was not, however, the perception of a majority Protestant public and media who were waiting for their expectations to be fulfilled. Certainly Bishop Cornthwaite, whether or not he was familiar with works such as Beatrice or The Nunnery, was certainly aware of the conclusions that might be drawn if Saurin went public and of the potential for scandal; he wrote to Mrs Starr urging her to ensure she had witnesses in all her dealings with Miss Saurin, and advised her to show a copy of his dispensation to, 'some intelligent and influential Protestant in Hull'. He worried that Saurin might, 'feign to run away under the pretence of escaping'.<sup>30</sup> (Escaping nuns featured widely in anti-convent literature including both Beatrice and The Nunnery). Unfortunately for the Bishop, several factors emerged at the beginning of the trial which seemed to confirm Protestant distrust in Catholic fair play.

Firstly, two of Saurin's witnesses, her Jesuit brother and Dr O'Hanlon, failed to make an appearance in court at the beginning of the trial and had to all intents and purposes disappeared, prompting a vexed Lord Cockburn to make a public appeal for them to come forward. Dr O'Hanlon did turn up fairly late on in the proceedings, and was a valuable witness for the prosecution, but Fr. Matthew Saurin had been sent to Bordeaux under obedience and did not attend. It was well-known to readers of anti-Catholic literature that, of all Roman Catholics, the Jesuits were the most cunning and deceitful and fanatically dedicated to their faith to the exclusion of all normal morality.<sup>31</sup> It looked as though the Catholic hierarchy was massing against Miss Saurin in a rather underhand way.<sup>32</sup> There was also a conflict of evidence between Dr O'Hanlon and Fr. Edward

Goldie, Bishop Cornthwaite's secretary, who had acted as secretary to the commission of inquiry, as to the outcome and legality of the inquiry. Furthermore, the inquiring Protestant asked, if the sisters had made a vow of obedience to Mother Starr, how reliable would their evidence be? Surely they were obliged to act as she directed them, possibly to the point of perjury?<sup>33</sup> As if to illustrate this, part of the defence's case rested on sworn depositions from her fellow nuns that Miss Saurin had ill-treated some of the children she taught and a dozen or so were brought from Hull to London to testify. All of them denied that Miss Saurin had behaved badly towards them, although one or two said that some of the other sisters had.<sup>34</sup> It might have appeared that there was Catholic duplicity at work here.

There was much, then, for the Protestant imagination to work on, perhaps prompted by the memory of the Achilli v. Newman trial some 16 years earlier and the salacious accusations (unproved) made then.<sup>35</sup> There was plenty of opportunity to read all about the convent case as it was widely reported in the national press, from The Times and Morning Post to The News of the World, while the major periodicals ran articles relating to the case and to conventualism generally throughout 1869. The more serious daily papers ran daily court reports and the case featured prominently in The Times Law Reports. The Law Reports were verbatim and non-committal, and although properly there should have been no editorial comment while the case was *sub judice*, many papers followed The Times leader of 10 February 1869 (which earned a judicial rebuke) in commenting on the case and the issues it raised, particularly the suitability of the conventual life for ladies:

Our only purpose in alluding to the trial and its amazing disclosures is to suggest a word in season, and very proper to the day, to those young ladies who, like Miss Saurin, at the age of seventeen or twenty feel they cannot observe fasts, or feasts, or, indeed, any day as their higher feelings would dictate, and who see in a Convent the only means to a sublime life.<sup>36</sup>

The leader writer satirically suggested that convents were good ways of 'using up' surplus women, but saw the case as a warning against young ladies being allowed to indulge misplaced spiritual idealism.

Blackwood's (May 1869) saw the case as both focusing attention on convents while at the same time debunking popular romantic ideas of life in the cloister. The



article also noted that the case was happening just as conventual life, and the reference here is almost certainly to Anglican Sisterhoods, had achieved a degree of popular credibility:

... never since the Reformation has conventual life been so interesting to the body of English women, and to the whole nation through them [...] it is a time when the cloister has assumed a reality as a possible sphere and refuge, in contrast with that sentimental dreamland which it seemed to the youthful readers of Mrs Ratcliffe (*sic*) and her successors.<sup>37</sup>

Although the case involved no scandal 'as the world understands the word', Blackwood's considered that:

The romance of the British cloister has received a rude shock; because the details of its life, as shown in this authentic disclosure, are vulgar.<sup>38</sup>

The Morning Post commented on the immense public appeal of the trial at its onset:

Intense interest prevails in the case. The court is densely crowded, and all the avenues are blocked up; and, although an additional police force is on duty, it is with the utmost difficulty that access can be got to the court. The galleries are filled with the various witnesses, amongst whom are a large number of sisters, the peculiarity of whose dress is a novel feature in the auditory generally to be found in a court of justice. General Peel, Lord Charles Lennox, Lord Bingham, Baron Hompesch (the Bavarian Minister), Mr Surtees, MP, and Mr Bass, MP, visited the court, and remained some time listening to the evidence.<sup>39</sup>

The convent's local paper, the Hull Packet and East Riding Times, finding a potential scandal on its doorstep made the most of it. Its first editorial on the subject (5 February 1869), 'Revelations of Convent Life', summed up the facts of the case succinctly, but went on to state: 'The quarrel originated in the refusal of Miss Saurin, otherwise Sister Mary Scholastica Joseph, to communicate to the Lady Superior certain questions which the priest had put to her in the confessional, and which appear to have greatly horrified, perhaps we may say disgusted her. Here is a fine theme for MR MURPHY!'.

This is, of course, not accurate: Miss Saurin had refused to tell Mrs Starr what she had said to the priest. However, the nature of the questions a priest could put to a lady during confession frequently formed the basis of Protestant pamphlets on the subject,

most notoriously The Confessional Unmasked in which these questions were revealed as fundamentally indecent.<sup>40</sup> The confessor, according to the author, was instructed to delve into the most private parts of his penitents' lives. If a lady appeared modest, '... that modesty must be overcome, or else he is authorised to deny her absolution.'<sup>41</sup> For instance, the author claimed that a married lady might be asked about marital relations with her husband, not only how often, but where and in what position, and the exact nature of any foreplay that might have taken place. Unmarried ladies and girls would also be asked intimate questions, with the confessor having the right to suggest things they might have done with their men friends or sweethearts in order to break down any barriers of propriety. Furthermore, according to The Confessional Unmasked, the Roman Catholic church regarded hearing such confession as a 'just cause for entertaining sensual motions' on the part of the priest, and 'Attendance upon invalids!! is also a just cause for sensual motions'.<sup>42</sup> The exact form these 'sensual motions' might take is not described, but the author offers a dire warning:

Only think of allowing a wife or daughter to go alone to confession to such beastly sensualists, or of permitting such hideous monsters to enter their sick chamber, especially when they are recovering.<sup>43</sup>

William Hogan, in Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries, claimed that the suggestions priests were allowed to ask girls put impure thoughts into their heads. Not only that, but the whole atmosphere of the confessional was tainted with immorality and conducted by:

...Romish priests and bishops - men whose private lives and conversation with each other and with their penitents in the confessional, breathe nothing but the grossest licentiousness and foetid impurities.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the more factual approach of The Confessional Unmasked, which listed extracts (in the original Latin) from priests' manuals by casuists such as Peter Dens and St Alphonsus Liguori on one side of the page and a translation, with comments, on the other, Hogan indulged in speculation. He was most suggestive about the relationship between women and their confessors, claiming that priests insinuated themselves into women's affections by using religious language to give the impression that their licentiousness was



divinely sanctioned. Neither did they confine their attentions to innocent girls; Hogan claimed that three Irish priests in Albany, America, were responsible for between 60-100 children, many by married women.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, childless married women, particularly those with property 'are often told by priests that they have power from God to make them pregnant.'<sup>46</sup> Hogan, an American ex-Roman Catholic priest turned lawyer, left little to the imagination when speculating about the confessional:

But first let the reader figure to himself, or herself, a young lady, between the age from twelve to twenty, on her knees, with her lips nearly closed, pressed to the cheeks of the priest, who, in all probability, is not over twenty-five or thirty years old - for here it is worthy of remark, that these young priests are extremely zealous in the discharge of their sacerdotal duties, especially in hearing confessions, which all Roman Catholics are bound to make under pain of eternal damnation<sup>47</sup>

To confess a woman! imagine what it is. At the end of the church a species of closet or sentry-box is erected against the wall, where the priest awaits in the evening, after vespers, his young penitent whom he loves and who knows it; love cannot be concealed from the beloved person. You will stop me there: his character of priest, his education, his vow. I reply that there is no vow which holds good, that every village *curé* just come from the seminary, healthy, robust and vigorous, doubtless loves one of his parishioners. [...] She arrives, kneels down at his knees before him, whose heart leaps and palpitates. You are young, sir, or you have been so; between ourselves, what do you think of such a situation? Alone, most of the time, and having these walls, these vaulted roofs as sole witnesses, they talk; of what? alas! of all that is not innocent. They talk, or rather murmur, in low voice, and their lips approach each other, and their breaths mingle. This lasts for an hour or more, and is often renewed.<sup>48</sup>

What the addressee thought of the situation is unknown, although the implication of close physical contact and possibly fellatio is heavily insinuated. If that sort of thing could happen in a public church, Hogan suggested, far worse must go on within the walls of a convent where, '... nuns act in the trebble (*sic*) capacity of cooks, teachers, and prostitutes, for Jesuits.'<sup>49</sup> Nunneries, he claimed, were in fact little more than 'Popish brothels'<sup>50</sup> and little better than 'the harem of the Emperor of Constantinople'.<sup>51</sup>

In raising the question of the confessional, the editor of the Hull Packet was making journalistic capital out of popular prejudice and prurient speculation and dragging in William Murphy, with all that his 'lectures' implied, for good measure. The Hull Packet of 12 February 1869 contained an amalgam of court reports from The Times

dealing with some of the more newsworthy aspects of Miss Saurin's evidence, such as the incidents of stripping and confinement to the lumber room. An editorial, 'Convent Life in Hull' commented on the 'sort of life - or rather, we should say, the living death - which the occupants of the Hull convent have to endure', and continues:

All of our town readers must be familiarised with the sight of the isolated house on the Anlaby-road, which was purchased by Roman Catholics some years ago. The passers by must have marked that it has ever since lost the cheerful and pleasant look of the happy family home which it once wore; and how the ever-closed windows, with their blinds drawn down, and the forlorn look of the shrubbery and grass-grown garden which interpose between the house and the highway, suggest the feeling that the square-built mansion is either untenanted or occupied only by some old servant until the family owning it shall return. Many a visitor to the town has asked, "What is that gloomy-looking building - an asylum or a prison". Well, not exactly either. They are open to inspection, it is not.<sup>52</sup>

The tone of this paragraph is distinctly Gothic, and demonstrates popular expectations of the case: the desolate house, closed windows, its 'isolated' position, are all motifs of stories of abduction by priests and imprisonment in convents to be found in anti-Catholic fiction and in the 'true' tales circulated by ultra-Protestant movements. The convent to which Beatrice is taken is particularly dreary:

The hollow crash of the convent-bell at this moment attracted the attention of Beatrice, who glanced round a building - the solemn dulness of which actually made her yawn. The high wall which surrounded it had a mysterious, sombre, distrustful aspect, the heavy sullen-looking gates seemed as if borrowed from a gaol, the grate of punched iron was like that of a larder for meat, and the small riveted iron lattices, from which nothing could be seen, were like those of a sepulchre.<sup>53</sup>

Again, the language is carefully chosen: the personification of the building as distrustful and sullen and its identification with tombs and gaols suggesting the kind of life that was led inside, while the idea of a meat larder suggests a receptacle for flesh that is perhaps more than just dead to the world.

Like Catherine Sinclair, the editor of The Hull Packet was being deliberately emotive - the fact that the house was once a 'happy family home' reflected current concern that convents insisted on nuns breaking all family ties and denying natural filial affection and obedience. Similarly, the families of those involved in minority religious groups or



sects today regard with suspicion what they perceive as encouragement to sever links with the natural family, and to regard the group as a substitute. The wealth and purchasing power of the Catholic church, and the dangers to Protestantism inherent in these, are implied by the reference to the house as a 'mansion', and suspicion of what goes on inside by the reference to the fact that the convent is 'not open to inspection'. There was a sinister dichotomy here in an institution that appeared to base its discipline largely on constant surveillance of its inmates, but which was closed to the view of outsiders.

The Packet continued in this sensationalist vein and on 28 February 1869 printed an article entitled 'Another Case of Convent Discipline'. The story concerned a nun from Louvain, Belgium, who 'belonged to one of the best families of that neighbourhood', and who had been imprisoned in a small, damp, underground cell. Attracting the attention of a gardener, she persuaded him to supply her with writing materials and carry a letter to her brother-in-law. The brother was at first refused entry to the convent, but returned with the police and freed, not only his unfortunate relative, but also five other nuns in the same circumstances.<sup>54</sup> This, of course, is the sort of thing Protestant readers wanted to hear to confirm their worst suspicions. The story contained all the required ingredients of plot: the underground cells, the imprisonment of ladies, the helpful retainer, the obstructive Superior and the gallant hero.<sup>55</sup> The leading Roman Catholic journal, The Tablet, tried (probably in vain) to refute this story, which was being widely circulated. It printed a letter from the Rector of the American College at Louvain explaining that the nuns in question had asked the Archbishop of Malins for dispensation from their vows and were voluntarily waiting in the convent for confirmation from Rome.<sup>56</sup>

But whatever the Hull Packet tried to make of the Great Convent Case, and it was not alone in raising expectations, the plain fact of the matter was that there was no scandal of the sort commonly associated with convents. That is, no unwilling postulants chained up in dungeons, no mysterious deaths, no seductions and no Sisters escaping at dead of night. The minority Catholic and Anglo-Catholic press was scathing about its Protestant counterparts' tendency to seek out the sensational in the case. As The Tablet observed: 'A common fiction, too, of our Protestant contemporaries is, that nuns are retained within their cloisters by force, but even they must admit that here was a nun whom little less than force could induce to leave them.'<sup>57</sup> The irony of this situation was also noted by Punch which published a parody of a popular song, 'I won't be a nun', with the refrain:

But I will be a nun, Yes, I will be a nun,  
And the more that they don't want me, the more I'll be a nun.<sup>58</sup>

The Tablet also remarked rather acidly that, 'Miss Saurin and her family preferred to deal with twelve Protestant tradesmen', rather than appealing to Rome as they were entitled to.<sup>59</sup> The Saurin family faced a great deal of opposition and disapprobation from the Catholic church and Catholic community for their decision to go to court, not only for exposing their faith to public scrutiny, but also for the ordeal to which the convent was submitted. Coming from an environment that was essentially all-female it must have been difficult for the nuns to appear in court, particularly when giving evidence about the details of their daily life: using the water closet, their clothing, particularly references to stockings and stays, and the various penances imposed on them. Although they worked nominally in the world outside the convent, the sisters were allowed minimal contact with 'externs', particularly men, yet they had been thrust into the public domain and into an essentially male environment.<sup>60</sup> Even if the majority of spectators were women, the sisters were in most immediate contact with the judge, representatives of the legal profession and the jury. Whether or not the latter was comprised wholly of Protestants is unknown, but certainly there was a good chance that the majority might have been tradesmen, so that the sisters, who were essentially ladies, were to be judged by their social inferiors. In addition, the spectators frequently responded to the case in ways that patently ridiculed the Roman Catholic faith. The News of the World remarked that, '... there were roars of laughter from a ribald audience of idle people who had no sympathy whatever with things sacred, or any regard for the dignity of the Court.'<sup>61</sup> During Saurin's cross-examination The Times reported a certain partisanship on the part of the audience:

Some applause having been several times elicited by the answers given. Mr HAWKINS [for the defence] complained of it with some warmth. The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE said he hoped it would not occur again. Nothing, he said, was more distressing to those who were engaged in the administration of justice than these manifestations of feeling.<sup>62</sup>

As the case proceeded and the accusations and counter-accusations of the protagonists were deemed to centre around the trivial and uninteresting, public interest subsided. A typical opinion at this point was that of the editor of The Globe and Traveller: 'When it



was first opened, everybody naturally regarded it as a case of vast social importance, and of almost heroic fascination; but no sooner did we get into details than curiosity gradually gave place to fatigue, and we might almost say to disgust.<sup>63</sup> Vanity Fair, in a piece entitled 'After Dinner' regarded the trial's progress sardonically, with reference to populist anti-Catholic writing, the 'diabolical ingenuity' of the Jesuits, for example:

Can any fellow understand the case of Saurin v. Starr? Probably Mr Whalley can see through the deep and fell design. It is all the work of the Jesuits. The plaintiff and defendants are in collusion. The Roman Catholics want to wreak their vengeance on Protestants; but they must not burn Mr Tupper<sup>64</sup> or any other heretic at Smithfield. Mark their diabolical ingenuity! They get up a three weeks' trial; and so subject twelve jurymen to a horrible martyrdom. Burning is nothing to the sufferings of the unhappy jurymen in the Saurin trial.<sup>65</sup>

The distaste expressed by the editor of The Globe refers not only to the tedium of the evidence, but also to what it revealed about the workings of the community, which was to arouse almost as much antipathy as the anticipated sensationalism might have done. In the first place, there was the question of Mother Starr's authority: how much power should one person, more specifically one woman, have over others? Counsel for the prosecution, Sir John Coleridge, the Solicitor General, explained in his initial address to the jury that the nun, '...resigned absolutely all kinds of free will, and promised submission in word, deed, and thought to the Mother Superior. The latter had, therefore, a power such as it was most dangerous to intrust to poor fallible human creatures, and one capable of being used with the worst results ...'. The nuns, he went on, '... should behold God in their superiors, and his will in all their directions, and should be as firmly convinced that God spoke to them through their superiors as if an angel spoke to them ...'.<sup>66</sup> Lord Cockburn commented on this in his summing-up: 'The vow is that of obedience to this unlimited extent, that the voice of the Superior is as the voice of God, a form more emphatic could not be used, nor to my mind one more shocking ...'.<sup>67</sup> That the Lord Chief Justice regarded this form of vow as blasphemous is obvious, but did he find it all the more shocking because in this case the voice of God was channelled through a woman, through a member of a sex regarded as wholly ill-equipped for responsibility outside the domestic sphere? Although Lord Cockburn went on to emphasise that the vow of obedience meant

obedience to the rules and customs of the community and did not include anything contrary to the laws of God or man, it would seem that in this case Mother Starr may have overstepped the mark. Due to the supposed psychological failings of their sex discussed in the last chapter, women were anyway supposed to be incapable of competent leadership:

A woman is scarcely ever fitted to rule, so that there are ten chances to one in favour of a Mother Superior, who is caged for life with her own sex, becoming a capricious, little-minded tyrant.<sup>68</sup>

The question of the suitability of convent life for ladies, and of the ability of women to live together in self-governing communities was also raised during the course of the trial. The convent, proclaimed The Times leader of 10 February, divested of the romance of medievalism was simply a group of women and it was impossible for women, who have 'an infinity of pettiness' to live together in this way 'without coming into collision'. Miss Saurin had to endure hardships and torments 'none but women could inflict'.<sup>69</sup> It was a common supposition that women were unable to live together harmoniously. Margaret Goodman, an ex-Anglican Sister, noted that 'I have heard ladies acquainted with the conventual life remark, that nuns as a class exhibit much petty selfishness, self-conceit, and self-complacency.'<sup>70</sup> However, Mary Cusack, who had experience of both Anglican and Roman communities, claimed that 'One of the most common and most untrue of the popular prejudices against Sisterhoods is founded on the supposition that a number of women cannot live together without quarrelling with each other'.<sup>71</sup> Cusack said that there were occasional differences of opinion, but these were never serious or lasting.

Despite The Times leader writer's professed indifference to the outcome of the case he stated his intention of bringing it to the attention of young ladies who were attracted by the conventual life - Roman Catholic and Anglican. He admitted that there weren't enough secular opportunities which allowed young ladies useful work, but Saurin v. Starr allowed them to compare convents (and he made no distinction between different types of convent) with available alternatives for the unmarried: the writer suspected convents would come off worse in the comparison, '... it is impossible not to read and not to believe'.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, he wondered whether Miss Saurin's experience at Hull would be regarded as commonplace amongst the religious and how much of it was 'the very



principle of the institution, and how much the imported abuse'.<sup>73</sup> The fact that Saurin was a lady 'tormented' by ladies seemed to him particularly pitiable, and he concluded:

What we are noticing is the picture of Convent life. This is not what the young ladies of Belgravia, if they are not "fast", are said to be dying for. This is the promised escape from that miserable house of bondage, the dull old Church of England and its homely ways. They that fly should have a refuge; they that would avoid the storm must have a harbour; but we don't see it here.<sup>74</sup>

Sir John Coleridge, in his summing up, took a similar view of the convent:

Dragged into "the light of common day", judged by common understanding, this life loses all its romantic character and turns out to be a very poor and ordinary affair indeed. Little sins created by silly rules ... all independence of mind crushed out under abject humiliation ... what utter rubbish all this is; what a parody it is upon the stern, simple, manly teaching (to use no higher names) of St. Peter and St. Paul.<sup>75</sup>

Women, then, were unable to live up to the masculine standards of the early martyrs, and the court seems to have been pervaded with a hearty male contempt at the efforts of women attempting to run their lives without men, a contempt which was reflected in much of the reporting of the case. The writer of the Blackwood's article, 'Convent Life' was of the opinion that, 'there are peculiar dangers to women herding together without the invigorating stimulant of masculine thought' - the frequent presence of celibate clergy apparently not being masculine enough to stimulate or invigorate.<sup>76</sup> This of course was contrary to the more commonly held view that the presence of male clergy was, if anything, over-stimulating. A second editorial in The Times also emphasised the dangers of women being shut up together with only petty concerns (thus conveniently disregarding the nursing and teaching work of Mercy nuns) but noted that boys at boarding school, because of their sex, were not prey to the same pettiness and jealousy.<sup>77</sup>

The same editorial blamed the convent system for debasing its inmates and attributed this not only to the minutiae of convent discipline, but also to the fact that Miss Saurin (like the novices observed by Beatrice) had been made to carry out menial and dirty household tasks unsuited to a lady. This was another point of controversy: that the women voluntarily debasing themselves were ladies. Saurin herself claimed that housework was the task of lay-sisters, and that Starr should not have made her do it.<sup>78</sup>

Blackwood's talked about the 'vulgarizing tendency of convent life', but doubted that the mere actions of washing, scrubbing and sweeping were to blame, the fault lay in 'turning them from an honest, cheerful livelihood for one class, into an exercise of poverty and obedience for another' which would inevitably have a coarsening effect as the trial had demonstrated.<sup>79</sup> No lady, the article continued, would act as Mrs Starr and Mrs Kennedy had done in forcing Miss Saurin to strip so that they could search her. The Times concurred, adding that, 'educated and devout ladies, together with the voluntary acceptance of the duties of menials, and of the submissiveness of schoolchildren, betray an involuntary propensity to assume at the same time the habits of mind and some of the principles of the same class'. Sir John Coleridge had touched on the same theme in his opening address for the prosecution claiming that the case showed, 'what women were capable of when they shut themselves up from their kind and did violence to the instincts of their nature, and the great, though mean and petty, cruelty they could wreak upon a sister in the name of a religion of love.'<sup>80</sup>

So, although the Hull convent had not kept its inhabitants behind bars, nor served as a seraglio for the Bishop of Beverley, it stood accused of perverting the very nature of womanhood itself. The way in which the nuns were made to live was first of all contrary to the 'instincts of their nature'. If woman was made for family life then nuns were denied not only children and a husband to direct and lead them, but also the paternal and sibling affection which a spinster might reasonably expect. The substitute provided by the sisterhood turned out to be a perversion of real family values. Absolute and unquestioning obedience was owed to the Mother Superior who might then misuse her power to direct her 'family' into paths which, if they were not downright immoral, were certainly suspect. The behaviour of the rest of the community at Hull who had colluded in spying on their sister and excluding her from their 'family' life had been seen to be an extension of the regular exercise of observing each other minutely for spiritual failings and reporting them, so that sisterly love was turned to suspicion. Even the practice of humiliation, of humbling themselves by undertaking menial tasks and submitting to petty punishments, in order to attain perfection, could be twisted, as the writer of the Blackwood's article noted, to become an exercise in inherent egoism.

What is clear from contemporary comment is that, although the convent system was blamed for perverting its inmates, there was also no confidence in women's ability to form autonomous communities without dissolving into an amorphous mass of spite and



intrigue. This was perceived to be as much due to the lack of higher moral guidance naturally provided by men as to Catholic asceticism. Incapable of sustaining a high moral tone themselves, a group of ladies living together would start to degenerate into fishwives. Miss Saurin was not regarded as a problem at Baggot Street where she was able to maintain family ties, but her behaviour altered in England where she was almost exclusively in the company of the community and there does seem to be evidence of some sort of personality disorder characterised in part by her strange eating habits and magpie tendencies.

A modern observer would recognise clear signs of bulimia in Saurin's alternate fasting and bingeing, and the fact that she spent a long time in the water closet, presumably purging herself. However, a reasonably well-informed nineteenth-century observer would have been in little doubt that Miss Saurin's behaviour was due, not only to the unnatural conditions in which she lived, but also to her unmarried status and the consequent malfunction of her reproductive system (which was believed by many physicians to govern women's physiology). The 'uterine system' gave women 'a hysteric predisposition', which made her 'subject to all the aberrations of love and religion'.<sup>81</sup> Ovarian malfunction resulting from lack of use might lead to the sort of aberrant behaviour noticeable in Miss Saurin - fasting, accumulating of strange possessions and her 'vision' (genuine or not):

Physicians have recorded numerous instances of strange and motiveless deceptions, thefts, and crimes practised by young women, even by ladies of unexceptionable morals, excellent education, and high rank. Fasting women, ecstasica, sly poisoners, pilfering lady-thieves, etc., present examples of this kind; particular instances we need not mention, as they may be found in most works on hysteria, and often occupy a niche in the newspapers.<sup>82</sup>

Women who did not marry were liable eventually to undergo alarming physical and mental changes due to the 'shrinking of the ovaria', so that they not only developed masculine characteristics, but became vicious to the point of insanity:

Her whole life is devoted to an ingenious system of mischief-making, she delights in tormenting - corporeally and mentally - all that she dare to practise upon.<sup>83</sup>

This could be applied, not just to Saurin, but also to her fellow nuns. A community of unmarried women combining against one of their number as Miss Saurin's fellow nuns had colluded with their Superior's treatment of her would tend to confirm any theory that enforced celibacy had adverse consequences for women. Indeed, deliberate abstinence from the normal functions of wife and motherhood might also lead to more easily classified mental disorder, and some aspects of Miss Saurin's behaviour, such as her particular attentions to visiting priests, her apparent ability to fast for long periods, and the 'vision' she described might be due to frustrated sexuality:

A similar intimate connection between fanatical religious exaltation and sexual excitement is exemplified by the lives of such religious enthusiasts as St Theresa and Catherine de Sienne, whose nightly trances and visions, in which they believed themselves received as veritable spouses into the bosom of Christ and transported into an unspeakable ecstasy by the touch of His sacred lips, attested, though they knew it not, the influence of excited sexual organs on the mind.<sup>84</sup>

Whether or not a correlation was made between this type of 'scientific' explanation and the prurient speculation of propagandists who also concerned themselves with convent sexuality is not known. However, Maudsley's book was published in 1870, a year after the trial, and its proceedings would not have been unknown to him.

The outcome of the case was a rather hollow victory for Miss Saurin who was awarded £500 damages (rather than the £5000 she had originally claimed) on the counts of conspiracy and libel. This included, however, the return of £300 dower money from the convent, so that the final amount of damages was £200. The result was greeted with much jubilation when it was announced to a large crowd waiting outside the court, and was seen as not only a victory for Protestantism but as a triumph of the British legal system.<sup>85</sup>

The lasting influence of the case is difficult to quantify. The 1870-71 Parliamentary Committee investigated monastical institutions and concluded that they should be left alone. The Hull Sisters of Mercy continued their work under the leadership of Mother Kennedy. Susan Saurin disappeared from public view, but reappeared some years later under a different name in a Visitation convent near Bristol. The Hull Packet ran an appeal for funds for the Hull Protestant Institute so that, 'it may be more usefully employed in the defence and spread of Protestant principles.'<sup>86</sup> There was a dramatic rise



in publishers' advertisements for ultra-Protestant and anti-Catholic publications, but it's not possible to judge whether this was in reply to increased demand or simply a piece of commercial opportunism. The titles indicate that there was an unwillingness to let go of the popular conception of the convent, despite all that had transpired in the trial. A representative selection from The News of the World and Weekly Dispatch for the period of the trial included titles directly relating to the case, such as The Convent Trial - Saurin v. Starr. The real life of a Sister of Mercy (Illustrated with authentic portraits). Maria Monk made a reappearance, and one advertisement in the Weekly Dispatch (16 March) included: Mysteries of Convent Life, The Nun: or Convents and Confessors, Morality of the Confessional; or, the Depravity of the Romish Priesthood, Monks and their Maidens, and The Jesuit; or, how Women Fall.

Symptomatic of a reluctance to relinquish pre-Convent Case attitudes was a story that appeared in The Gentleman's Magazine, entitled 'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery', which referred to the Great Convent Case and the sensation it had caused in its opening paragraph:

The sayings and doings of religious sisters, have not long since filled numberless columns of the daily press, and attracted a considerable amount of public attention. Their speech and their silence, their thoughts and their deeds, their hopes and their fears, their punishments and their rewards, their joys and their sorrows, their loves and their hatreds, in fine, their lives and their deaths, have formed the subjects of the discussion, the comment, the abuse, and the praise of thousands of Englishmen and women. Every petty detail of their uninteresting existence ... [has] been eagerly scanned, canvassed and criticised.<sup>87</sup>

The story promised to raise the veil from a foreign nunnery and reveal a daily life as different from that at Hull, 'as the icefields of Greenland differ from the sandy desert of Sahara'.<sup>88</sup> It is the usual tale of a reluctant nun pursued by 'cowled Don Juans' with much innuendo about roomy confessionals and what went on inside them.<sup>89</sup> Although the story does not draw directly from incidents related at the trial, it does briefly mention the supposed psychological side-effects of a community of unmarried women which were commented on in Sir John Coleridge's summing up, and in the Times editorial of 10 February:

Monotonousness of existence, want of active occupation, religious exaltation, and lack of healthy exercise for mind and body, caused their natural consequences. Nervous diseases, from fits, convulsions, catalepsy, to hallucinations, aberration of mind and acute mania, were prevalent at St Gregory, and cases of suicide were by no means infrequent. [...] Want of space prevents us from even alluding to the numerous affecting incidents recorded in the book on this subject, clearly demonstrating that the laws of Nature cannot be infringed with impunity.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the leader writer of The Times's fervent wish, echoed by the 'Convent Life' author, that the details of conventual life revealed in the Great Convent Case would serve as a warning to young ladies of religious tendencies, both Roman Catholic and Anglican, other writers were not convinced. Penelope Holland followed up her first article for Macmillan's with a second, 'A Few More Words on Convents and on English Girls', in which she stressed again that, as long as convents and Sisterhoods continued to offer opportunities for useful work which could not be found elsewhere, then they would continue to flourish.<sup>91</sup> The emphasis put on the less attractive aspects of community life, such as "... ragged clothes, coarse food, menial work, forced submission to petty tyranny!" would have no effect on women who were determined to seek out a more worthwhile livelihood.<sup>92</sup> Most women who entered convents or Sisterhoods were very well aware of the living conditions, and:

... it is absurd to treat the hardships and privations of a nun as a cause of complaint. It would be as reasonable for a soldier to object to drill, a sailor to the sea, or a clerk to writing.<sup>93</sup>

Holland further argued that the frivolity and 'worrying littleness of society' was forcing 'good and able' women into convent or Sisterhood life and taking them out of the world where they might do much good if given the opportunity<sup>94</sup>:

Let us take advantage of the spirit which is now abroad - a spirit of keen religious feeling and consciousness of responsibility; and by guiding it, and permitting it to perform God's work in the world, prevent it from taking refuge in the moral suicide of monastic institutions.<sup>95</sup>

At the same time, she 'did not wish to cast any slight on the sisterhoods, which are already doing so much noble work in the world', rather, to widen the fields of useful employment and occupation for women willing and competent to undertake them.



The Times and Blackwood's agreed with Holland that there simply were not enough suitable secular opportunities for women outside the home, and Blackwood's also concurred with her that the attraction of the conventual life for the 'better' type of woman meant a 'great - infinite, indeed - loss to the community'.<sup>96</sup> Neither The Times nor Blackwood's, however, while warning against such a life, suggested any alternatives. Holland felt that such warnings, and the derision which other publications had aimed at convents in the wake of the trial, might even serve to enhance their image in the eyes of those who were attracted to them: 'I think it probable that the harsh and ignorant ridicule which has lately been levelled against convents may cause a revulsion of feeling in their favour.'<sup>97</sup>

Holland also noted that whereas most publications were quick to condemn or ridicule convent life they did not, like The Times and Blackwood's, offer any intelligent or practical advice for women eager to contribute to the general good of society. She attributed this to the fact that men were all too frequently so immersed in their own affairs, 'the busy world of literature or politics', to be at all aware of changing attitudes amongst women, and that if they did notice any unusual disturbance they put it down to 'a passing fashion of the day'. Holland considered that men generally seemed to divide women into three classes: angels, 'exactly the reverse' and 'as being endowed with the faculties and feelings of an ordinarily intelligent kitten'. It was this last class that men 'without any examination believe to be occasionally seized with a fanatic desire of transforming themselves into nuns.'<sup>98</sup>

Holland ends by calling for more consideration to be given by men to the needs of women of her class, reiterating the point she made in her first article, that the women themselves were well aware of what was necessary. The steady increase in Anglican Sisterhoods and Roman Catholic Mercy houses in Britain throughout the rest of the nineteenth century is perhaps evidence of the slowness of men to respond to the plea of more opportunities for useful and socially acceptable secular work for unmarried or underemployed women.

- <sup>1</sup> G F A Best, 'Popular Protestantism in Victorian Britain', in Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clarke, ed. Robert Robson (London: Bell, 1967), p.127
- <sup>2</sup> William Hogan, Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries, 5th ed. (London: Ward & Co., 1851 [1845])
- <sup>3</sup> The Confessional Unmasked: showing The Depravity of the Priesthood and Immorality of the Confessional, being the Questions Put To Females in Confession, etc., etc., extracted from the Theological Works Now Used by Cardinal Wiseman, his Bishops and Priests. With Notes. By CB. (London: Thomas Johnston, 1851)
- <sup>4</sup> Flora Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford (London: The Reprint Society, 1948), p.202
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Kingsley, 'Froude's History of England', Macmillan's Magazine, 7, January 1864
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in, Alex Vidler, The Church in an Age of Revolution (London: Penguin, 1988), p.151
- <sup>7</sup> Times, 10 February 1869
- <sup>8</sup> The senior members of the convent were referred to as 'Mrs' throughout the trial. It was obviously a courtesy title.
- <sup>9</sup> The protagonists in the case were all originally from the Mercy Convent in Baggot Street, Dublin, founded by the Venerable Catherine McAuley. The Superior in 1869 was Mother Vincent Whitty. For a full account of the Hull and Clifford sisters, see Marie McClelland, 'The First Hull Mercy Nuns: A Nineteenth Century Case Study', Recusant History, October 1994.
- <sup>10</sup> The Bishop had made a dispensation of Saurin's vows of poverty and obedience and had applied to Rome for an annulment of her vow of chastity some three years before she left the convent. However, as Saurin herself had not requested to be released from her vows, the Bishop's dispensation was negated.
- <sup>11</sup> 'The First Hull Mercy Nuns'
- <sup>12</sup> Dr John O'Hanlon, Librarian of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Times, 23 February 1869.
- <sup>13</sup> Times, 11 February 1869
- <sup>14</sup> Times, 24 February 1869
- <sup>15</sup> Catherine Sinclair, Beatrice: Or, The Unknown Relatives (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1852), p.406
- <sup>16</sup> Beatrice, p.406
- <sup>17</sup> Beatrice, p.410
- <sup>18</sup> Beatrice, p.409
- <sup>19</sup> Beatrice, p.415
- <sup>20</sup> Times, 23 February 1869
- <sup>21</sup> The Nunnery; or, Popery Exposed in Her Tyranny, Stereotyped for the British Society for Promoting the Religious Principles of the Reformation, (London: Nisbet, Hatchard, Seeley, 1851)



22 The Nunnery, p.9, Beatrice, p.413

23 Emma Jane Worboise, Overdale; or, The Story of a Pervert (London: James Clarke, 1869), p.497

24 Times, 23 February 1869

25 Times, 22 February 1869

26 Times, 22 February 1869

27 Times, 24 February 1869

28 Fr George Porter, Rector of St Francis Xavier, Liverpool

29 Times, 13 February 1869

30 Times, 10 February 1869

31 Auricular Confession features supposed Jesuit criminality heavily. The evil Fr Eustace, in Beatrice, who orders the abduction of the heroine to a convent, frightens old men to death and perverts wealthy heiresses to get hold of their money is a Jesuit. He also tries to influence a local election in a most underhand manner. The eponymous anti-hero of Mrs Trollope's Father Eustace: A Tale of the Jesuits (1847) is the tool of a Jesuit conspiracy which exploits his piety and good looks to try to obtain the fortune of a susceptible young woman.

32 This was the opinion of the editor of The Hull Packet, 5 February 1869, who thought it 'remarkable and suspicious' that two important witnesses for the plaintiff should have disappeared and hinted at 'undue influence' preventing them from attending.

33 This question was discussed at some length in 'Convent Life', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 105, (May 1869), pp.607-621.

34 Times, 24 February 1869

35 Giacinto Achilli was an Italian Roman Catholic priest who converted to Protestantism and came to England where he produced a book, Dealings with the Inquisition, and worked for the Evangelical Protestant Alliance as a lecturer. Newman tried to expose Achilli as a charlatan by accusing him in print of sexual misconduct during his time as a priest. In 1853, Achilli sued for libel and Newman lost. Much of the evidence rested on the alleged misconduct which was described in detail.

36 Times, 10 February 1869

37 'Convent Life', p.610

38 'Convent Life', p.610

39 The Morning Post, 6 February 1869, p.7

40 Presiding over an action against its publisher in the Queen's Bench in 1868, Lord Cockburn had ruled that The Confessional Unmasked was obscene.

41 The Confessional Unmasked, p.38

42 The Confessional Unmasked, p.38

- 43 The Confessional Unmasked, p.38
- 44 Auricular Confession, p.9
- 45 Auricular Confession, p.58
- 46 Auricular Confession, p.93
- 47 Auricular Confession, p.42
- 48 Auricular Confession, pp.49-50
- 49 Auricular Confession, p.141
- 50 Auricular Confession, p.30
- 51 Auricular Confession, p.36
- 52 The Hull Packet and East Riding Times, 12 February 1869
- 53 Beatrice, p.405
- 54 Hull Packet, 28 February 1869
- 55 Both Beatrice and The Nunnery contain two strikingly similar incidents of escape from convents.
- 56 The Tablet, 20 February 1869, Vol.33, No.1506, p.543
- 57 The Tablet, 13 February 1869, Vol.33, No.1505, p.297 (The founder of The Tablet, Frederick Lucas, was Mother Vincent Whitty's brother-in-law.)
- 58 Punch, 13 February, 1869
- 59 The Tablet, 6 March 1869, Vol.33, No.1508
- 60 The Hull sisters were not the only women to suffer in this way: 'As Butler [Josephine] was haunted by the vision of prostitutes being first seduced, then arrested, tried, judged, convicted, and imprisoned by men, Fawcett [Millicent Garrett] was positively haunted by the horror involved in cases such as one at Middlesex Sessions in 1893 where an 8-year-old girl who had been sexually assaulted was denied the presence of her mother in court, and was thus forced to give evidence and undergo cross-examination about her own sexual trauma in a court filled entirely with men.' Ray Strachey, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, pp.164-5, cited in Barbara Caine, Victorian Feminists.
- 61 The News of the World, 28 February 1869, p.4
- 62 Times, 8 February, 1869 p.11
- 63 The Globe and Traveller, 27 February, 1869, p.2
- 64 Martin Tupper, a deeply Protestant poet, apparently a favourite of the royal family. His extensive output included the sonnets 'Luther', 'Papal Aggression', 'Protesting Truth'. By 1869 his popularity had waned considerably, but in 1851, 5000 copies of his sonnet 'Romish Priestcraft-1851' had been distributed on the streets of Manchester.
- 65 Vanity Fair, 27 February, 1869, p.2



- 66 Times, 4 February, 1869
- 67 Times, 27 February, 1869
- 68 Henry H T Brandreth, Dr Lee of Lambeth: A Chapter in Parenthesis in the History of the Oxford Movement (London: SPCK, 1951), p.46
- 69 Times, 10 February, 1869
- 70 Margaret Goodman, Experiences of An English Sister of Mercy (London: 1861), p.8
- 71 Mary Frances Cusack, Five Years in a Protestant Sisterhood and Ten years in a Catholic Convent (London: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1869), p.48
- 72 Times, 10 February 1869
- 73 Times, 10 February 1869
- 74 Times, 10 February 1869
- 75 Times, 26 February 1869
- 76 'Convent Life', p.614
- 77 Times, 27 February 1869
- 78 See, Susan O'Brien, 'Lay Sisters and Good Mothers: Working-class Women in English Convents, 1840-1910', in Studies in Church History: 27, Women in the Church. Traditionally, lay sisters were of working-class origin and were more or less domestic servants within convents. A professed or choir sister would not normally perform household tasks. However, Mercy nuns, as a nineteenth century foundation tended to be more democratic than older orders.
- 79 'Convent Life', p.614
- 80 Times, 4 February 1869
- 81 John Gideon Milligen, The Passions; or, Mind and Matter (London: J and D Darling, 1848), quoted in Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, eds, Embodied Selves (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.169.
- 82 Anon, 'Woman in her psychological relations', Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology, 4 (1851), pp.30-5
- 83 'Woman in her psychological relations', p.33
- 84 Henry Maudsley, Body and Mind: An Inquiry into their Connection and Mutual Influence, Specially in Reference to Mental Disorders (London: Macmillan, 1870), quoted in Embodied Selves, p.205.
- 85 Times, 28 February, 1869
- 86 Hull Packet, 19 February 1869
- 87 'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery', The Gentleman's Magazine, 3 (n.s.), (November 1869), pp.677-690.

- 88 'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery', p.677
- 89 'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery', p.683
- 90 'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery', p.686
- 91 Penelope Holland, 'A Few More Words on Convents and on English Girls', Macmillan's Magazine, 19, (May 1869), pp.534-543
- 92 'A Few More Words on Convents', p.535
- 93 'A Few More Words on Convents', p.535
- 94 'A Few More Words on Convents', p.537
- 95 'A Few More Words on Convents', p.539
- 96 'Convent Life', p.620
- 97 'A Few More Words on Convents', p.534
- 98 'A Few More Words on Convents', p.538



#### Chapter 4: Representations of Sisterhoods - Partisan and Non-Partisan Fiction

*'Once read a wrong, bad book, and the mischief it will do you can never be repaired.'*<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Ellis Baker writing in The Novel and the Oxford Movement about the 1860s and 70s remarks, 'A not uncommon figure in the novels of this period is the member of an Anglican Sisterhood'.<sup>2</sup> The figure of the Anglican Sister might not be uncommon in mid-nineteenth century Tractarian fiction, but it is a rarity when the author has no particular religious axe to grind. Where they do appear in more mainstream fiction it is difficult to find the work of Anglican Sisterhoods, and the ethos behind their founding, treated with any kind of gravitas. In sympathetic religious fiction they are frequently used as a vehicle for propaganda, their work amongst the poor, particularly nursing, generally serving to illustrate the most generally acceptable aspect of the Oxford Movement. Memoirs of Sisterhood life by ex-Sisters which appeared in the 1860s were regarded as denigratory to Sisterhood life, although at least one was ambivalent rather than condemning.<sup>3</sup> Of the main High Church novelists, only Charlotte M Yonge manages to create a positive, if incomplete, picture of Sisterhoods without overt propagandizing. Other mid-nineteenth century High Church writers, perhaps feeling that Sisterhoods were too contentious an issue for fiction, were content to extol and promote the merits of Anglo-Catholicism and the individual's response to the Church's teaching.

The precepts of Anglo-Catholicism particularly emphasised for women were the importance of duty and of obedience to the appropriate authority - the Church, the will of God as interpreted by right-minded clergy, and the family, most importantly its male members. The importance of self-discipline and the damaging effects of self-will are also stressed. At its most extreme, this system of accountability welcomed any personal disaster as a manifestation of the will of God, with the individual's ability to submit to whatever misfortune befalls them seen in direct relation to their spirituality.

The best-known literary exponents of this line of thought are probably Charlotte M Yonge and Elizabeth Missing Sewell. Joseph Ellis Baker considers that the latter made particular use of Anglo-Catholicism 'to keep women and children mentally obedient'.<sup>4</sup> In Margaret Percival (1847) the importance of obedience is emphasised by the stress Sewell

puts on the use of the Rubric in determining Anglican forms of worship.<sup>5</sup> As the beauty of ritual is dependent on, and secondary to, the rule that determines it, so Anglican lives must be conducted within defined boundaries and with deference to authority. In Jane Eyre, also published in 1847, the High Church Eliza Reed continually studies the Rubric of the Book of Common Prayer, and lives her life to a relentless routine - an external manifestation of the self-discipline considered essential by the Oxford Movement, particularly at this time.<sup>6</sup> Eliza later secedes from the Church of England and joins a Roman Catholic convent abroad.

Laneton Parsonage (1846-48) uses the small incidents of schoolgirl life to illustrate the importance of self-discipline and filial obedience in relation to the Church Catechism.<sup>7</sup> Far more than Yonge, Sewell carries the concept of absolute obedience to an extreme:

But dear Alice, can you not understand that all persons who are put over us - whether they are parents or clergymen or governesses - are put over us by God; and therefore we are not to ask whether we like them, but we are to obey and show them reverence, because it is His will. And you know, only yesterday, we were told in the sermon at church, that when we are commanded to "honour our father and mother," it means that we are to pay respect to all persons who have authority over us.<sup>8</sup>

Sewell extends the concept of authority to include anyone who might have been put there by the Lord. Absolute obedience to arbitrary authority, even if it is assumed to be God-given, frequently results in mental and spiritual suffering, but this is understood to be an integral part of the exercise of disciplining the self, and ultimately beneficial and improving.<sup>9</sup> As Shirley Foster notes, 'Elizabeth Sewell uses mental or physical affliction to emphasise her moral truths, either as a kind of purgatorial experience for the sufferer, or as a lesson for those who cause and witness it.'<sup>10</sup> Alice Lennox, in Laneton Parsonage, who continually disobeys her stern but kind guardian, undergoes much physical and mental suffering before it can be acknowledged that she has attained an acceptable state of spirituality and moral development.

Sewell's The Experience of Life (1857) is essentially a lengthy exploration of how, contrary to the usual social expectations, a single woman can lead a useful and fulfilled life. The central female character, Sarah (Sally), is initially discontented by the low esteem in which she is held by her extensive family. She allows herself to be guided by her spinster Great-Aunt Sarah and is brought to see that by dedicating her life to the service of others,



mainly in this case her financially inept family, she also dedicates her life to God. At one point, when Sally has realised that she has definitely passed the point of no return as regards marriageability, she discusses the attraction of the religious life with her great-aunt:

“I sometimes think that I should like to lead such a life as one hears described by Romanists; not exactly, perhaps, that of a nun, but of a sister of charity” ... “It might be a good and holy life for many ... and it might be better for us Church people if such things were possible; the time may come when it may be.”<sup>11</sup>

The Experience of Life is set at the beginning of the nineteenth century, before the emergence of the Oxford Movement, when Dissent was the only viable alternative to the Established Church. (Sewell shows how an energetic Dissenting minister, through his care for the poor and sick, encroaches on the parish of a lazy rector, thereby putting ignorant souls in spiritual danger). Sally's attraction to the religious life can therefore only be speculative. Sewell goes on to demonstrate how Sally's life mirrors that of a Sister of Mercy, by recognising the importance of duty, of charitable work, and of strict adherence to the teachings of the Church. Living when she does, before the formation of Sisterhoods, Sally has no option but to make her family her principal duty. Other fictional putative Sisters would be faced with the dilemma of choosing between their duty to their families and the vocation they felt they possessed to serve God through their Sisterhoods.

### **Felicia Mary Skene**

The question of how a single woman should conduct her life is also considered by Felicia Mary Skene in Hidden Depths (1866).<sup>12</sup> The attempts of Ernestine Courtenay to rescue the 'fallen' sister of a woman her brother has ruined and driven to suicide bring her into close contact with the prostitutes of Greyburgh (Oxford). Ernestine believes that 'to each on earth must be given some special work to do on behalf of their fellow-creatures.'<sup>13</sup> Skene, an Anglo-Catholic, devoted much of her own life to work amongst the Oxford slums, including nursing during the 1854 cholera epidemic. Although she was apparently forbidden by her parents to join Florence Nightingale (despite being over 30), she used her experience to train nurses for the Crimea.<sup>14</sup> As well as commenting strongly on the sexual double standard which persecuted the woman but turned a blind eye to the vices of the man, Skene recognises the unacceptability of her heroine's work to her peer group:

Ernestine ... knew that for a young lady of her rank in life to go out alone into the very haunts of sin to seek one of the fallen and degraded of her own sex, would be considered a very reprehensible departure from the usages of the society in which she had always lived. She must break down the barriers that hedged her in from so much as a knowledge of the deadly vice, with which she had now to grapple face to face ... To do all this would be a sore trial for a pure-minded Englishwoman; and yet for that very self sacrifice, she knew she would meet with unmitigated censure from her acquaintances. She would be told that her conduct was improper, unbecoming in a lady, and incompatible with womanly delicacy.<sup>15</sup>

The objections that Ernestine can foresee to her chosen work are those also raised against the work of Sisterhoods, primarily that well-born ladies would be coming into contact with things of which they should have no knowledge. The socially correct attitude towards women who were considered to have debased themselves was that of Ernestine's sister-in-law, who does not realise (or chooses not to acknowledge) either the relationship between her husband and his ex-mistress, or the fact that Lois is now a prostitute.<sup>16</sup> Ernestine's manservant, whom she sends to enquire about Lois, thinks that she demeans herself 'by asking questions about a person whose existence he conceived she ought to ignore'.<sup>17</sup> Whereas the general body of opinion would fear the contaminating effect of contact with women who were morally tainted, Anglo-Catholic thinking pointed to the fact that Jesus Christ and His disciples associated with publicans, sinners and lepers on equal terms, were not contaminated by them, and had a beneficial moral and spiritual influence over them.

Skene later makes a sharp and comical contrast between the work that Ernestine sees that she has to do and the charitable duty deemed appropriate to women of her class. Dr Granby, a clergyman whose help Ernestine has unsuccessfully tried to enlist, tells her of his family's efforts:

"My own daughters engage, at my desire, in works of Charity, piety and necessity. My sweet Louisa visits the infant-school once a week, and it is most cheering to see how she has taught the innocent little ones to clap their hands in unison; while Maria who is strikingly talented, and has a powerful voice, always leads our little choir in Term-time, when several of the collegians assist at our services, and can appreciate our musical efforts."<sup>18</sup>



While Louisa's efforts are restricted to minimal safe contact with the innocent, Maria's leadership of the choir only during term-time, when eligible collegians are present, suggests husband hunting as an ulterior motive. The text is questioning about their interpretation of their moral duty. To underline the deliberately cultivated uselessness and consequent lack of spirituality of Louisa and Maria, Skene creates their first encounter with Ernestine as they play croquet with undergraduates on the Rectory lawn.<sup>19</sup>

Ernestine is representative of many Anglo-Catholic women's attitudes to their own usefulness, and their determination to carry out their chosen vocations despite the unpleasantness of the work and the opprobrium they invariably received from their own class.<sup>20</sup> However, she rejects the idea of equality for women, declaring it to be contrary to God's will:

“And as to the sect who want to raise women out of their natural position, I utterly detest and abjure their opinions; they are contrary to laws both human and divine, in my opinion.”<sup>21</sup>

Women are naturally obedient to men but if men are found to be morally or spiritually wanting the Church represents a higher authority to which a woman can appeal. Ernestine finds a mentor in Mr Thorold, a High Church clergyman in Greyburgh, who is her guide to the brothels and prisons.<sup>22</sup> By the close of the narrative, however, Ernestine is working more or less independently in London, having rejected her fiancé, who has turned out to be an exemplar of the sexual double standard - he has ‘ruined’ Annie, the girl Ernestine is trying to save.

Ernestine also represents a new attitude towards the poor in that she believed, as many Anglo-Catholics did, that they should be treated (almost) as equals, with kindness and with consideration for their opinions.<sup>23</sup> A counter argument to those who held that well-born young women should not come into contact with vice was that pious ladies, because of strength of faith and character, and because their upbringing equipped them to cope with any situation, were best placed to reform prostitutes through teaching and through example:

... the only persons who could acknowledge their [prostitutes'] reformation, with any chance of success, would be earnest, religious women of the upper ranks, who would be willing, for the love of Christ, to devote themselves to so painful a task.<sup>24</sup>



However, Skene is critical of Sisterhood-run reformatories, portraying the home that Annie is sent to as too strict, and the Sisters too distant and cold, instead of 'working on their [the prostitutes'] affections'.<sup>25</sup> Ernestine realises that Annie, having suffered rejection by her lover and by her family, needs not only a stable environment, but also love to effect her reformation. At the end of the novel, Ernestine has established her own refuge where a small community of women can live as a family and rebuild their lives, and where the keynote is tolerance and understanding.

An interesting comparison to Skene's portrayal of prostitutes and reformatories is Wilkie Collins softened and sentimentalized picture in The New Magdalen (1873). Collins' reformatory is a Refuge run by a wholly sympathetic matron. The 'Magdalen', Mercy Merrick, despite being an ex-prostitute and a (wrongly) convicted thief, is trained as a nurse and serves in the Franco-Prussian war. Given the emphasis placed on good character, morality, and lady-like behaviour by the early nursing training schools, this is an extremely unlikely scenario.<sup>26</sup> In a somewhat escapist ending Mercy is shown, despite her obvious fraud and misrepresentation, to be the victim of circumstances and marries a clergyman.

### **Christina Rossetti - Maude**

Christina Rossetti was a committed Anglo-Catholic and Associate member of the All Saints Sisterhood, Margaret Street under whose auspices she undertook penitentiary work at their Magdalene home in Highgate. Her sister Maria entered the Sisterhood and became a professed Sister after a successful career as a governess. Rossetti's long short story Maude not only makes reference to the debate between life in the world and life in the cloister which she was to explore further in her poetry, but also the need for a positive sense of spiritual and moral direction.

The Rossettis attended Christ Church, Regent's Park, where William Dodsworth, co-founder of the first Sisterhood at Park Village West in 1845, was the incumbent. He was preparing Christina, aged 15, for confirmation when the founding Sisters made their first appearance in his church. A month later Rossetti had a breakdown which her doctor diagnosed as religious mania. Her illness was accompanied by a strong sense of guilt and sin.<sup>27</sup> There are certainly autobiographical elements to be found in Maude, particularly in Maude's constant self-examination and sense of personal unworthiness.



While spiritual self-inspection was encouraged in Anglo-Catholicism, it had to be combined with more practical, outward manifestations of spirituality. Maude is shown to be too much absorbed in herself which precludes helping others, and her agonised self-criticism results in spiritual uncertainty. Maude neglects her duties to herself, her mother and to others. Being a poet, she assumes an intellectual arrogance which prevents her from humbling herself before God and putting her trust in Him, and in His earthly representative, her local clergyman. At the same time, she carries on an almost continual internal debate about the ethics of writing poetry, unsure whether she is guilty of vanity, self-display and the desire to put herself forward. In Anglo-Catholic terms there was no harm in wanting to excel if it was done purely for the purpose of creating excellence in the sight of God, but taking pleasure, or pride, in that excellence would lead to vanity. Maude is also prone to morbidity and to evasiveness - she hides the truth without actually lying - and it is only when she makes confession to her clergyman that all starts to go well with her again.

Rossetti compares Maude with other High Church young ladies of her age and class presenting a cross-section of the life options open to such women at the time. Her cousin Mary marries, Mary's sister Agnes stays single and devotes her life to good works and her family, their friend Magdalen enters a Sisterhood, and Maude seeks literary fulfilment. Of the four, Rossetti presents Maude as seeking for the certainty that the direction she has taken is the right one. Instead of putting her trust in God to guide her towards the vocation for which she is intended, Maude, by obsessive introspection, tries to make the decision for herself.

Maude fails also in more practical ways, her cousins, Mary and Agnes, perform their domestic duties cheerfully, are sociable (which Maude is not), conscientious and sincere churchgoers, and embroider hangings for their church.<sup>28</sup> Their friend Miss Stanton rises before six in the depths of winter to make warm clothes for the poor and when her mother forbids her to visit their cottages in a scarlet fever epidemic, saves up her pocket money to buy them wine and soup.<sup>29</sup> Maude says she cannot help Agnes and Mary with their embroidery because she can't sew well enough, and admits that she was offered a district to visit by her clergyman, but 'did not like the trouble'.<sup>30</sup>

Magdalen Ellis, compared with Maude, unquestioningly follows her convictions and becomes a novice in a Sisterhood, working with poor children, and is 'calm and happy'.<sup>31</sup> She suggests that Maude, too, might be suited to a Sisterhood, a suggestion which Maude



muses over. Unfortunately, before Maude has time to consider if she has a vocation she is overturned in a cab, lingers painfully, which she considers a punishment from God for the sin of arrogance, and dies. Her cousin Mary burns most of Maude's poetry and places what remains in Maude's coffin, so that the evidence of her struggle with herself dies with her.

The simple and grateful acceptance of a vocation or spiritual direction as demonstrated by Magdalen, and by Maria Rossetti, was obviously envied by Rossetti who, like Maude, was given to obsessive self-examination and plagued by a guilty sense that she could not follow or accept spiritual direction without questioning.

### **Anthony Trollope**

Of the secular novelists who include religious matters in their work, Trollope, probably the nineteenth-century novelist most popularly associated with the Church of England, does not deal with Sisterhoods in any detail at all. This is consistent with his treatment of the Church in that, despite centring a fair proportion of his output around Anglican clergy, he manages to bypass most of the major issues facing the Church of England in the mid-nineteenth century. It is true that, particularly in Barchester Towers (1857), humour and dramatic tension are derived from the conflict between High Church, or rather High and Dry, clergy on the one hand and Evangelicals on the other. On the whole, however, Trollope's clergymen, in their manoeuvrings and machinations, resemble senior Civil Servants, members of the Establishment rather than the Established Church.

Trollope occasionally acknowledges the existence of Sisterhoods. In Barchester Towers (1857) Dr Proudie's daughters 'have certainly not distressed their parents, as too many English girls have lately done, by any enthusiastic wish to devote themselves to the seclusion of a Protestant nunnery'.<sup>32</sup> In 1857, following the work done by Sisterhoods with Nightingale in the Crimea, their reputation was relatively sound, but there is an amusing irony in the suggestion that the daughters of such prominent and worldly Evangelicals as the Proudies might contemplate joining a Tractarian Sisterhood.

In Framley Parsonage (1861) Trollope draws on common perceptions of conventual life and dubious Catholic practices fuelled by papal aggression and by the recent republication of Maria Monk. Lucy Robarts, having unwillingly refused Lord Lufton, talks to her sister-in-law: "I'll go into a home, I think," continued Lucy. "You know what these



homes are?" [...] "I'll starve myself and flog myself and in that way I'll get back my own mind and my own soul."<sup>33</sup>

The idea of a convent as a place of refuge for those frustrated or disappointed in love also occurs in The Vicar of Bullhampton (1869-70)<sup>34</sup>, a novel which considers women's attitude to marriage, and which is particularly antithetical to the recent 'Girl of the Period' articles in the Saturday Review.<sup>35</sup> Trollope claims that marriage 'is a woman's one career - let women rebel against the edict as they may. ... Girls, too, now acknowledge aloud that they have learned the lesson; and Saturday Reviewers and others blame them for their lack of modesty in doing so ...'. He goes on to protest about 'The Girl of the Period' attacks on husband hunting, claiming it is a necessity - unmarried women live a 'starved, thin, poor life', all girls 'healthy in body' long to be married - 'Let men be taught to recognise the same truth as regards themselves, and we shall cease to hear of the necessity of a new career for women.'<sup>36</sup>

The 'Girl of the Period' was of course accused of aping the manners of the *demi-monde*, and a central female character in The Vicar of Bullhampton, Carry Brattle, is a prostitute. Much discussion revolves around whether or not she should be sent to a reformatory which are represented as harsh, unloving places. Eventually she is welcomed back home through the intervention of her sister. Although writing from an antithetical position to that of Skene, like her, Trollope sees that the way to reform lies in love, both earthly and divine, and in forgiveness. The discipline and emphasis on repentance in a reformatory are inferior to the care and protection of the family.

### **Elizabeth Gaskell**

The importance of loving forgiveness and the dangers of apportioning blame too hastily are examined by the Unitarian, but ecumenically-minded, Elizabeth Gaskell in Ruth (1853) where Ruth is shown to be essentially pure despite having allowed herself to be seduced and consequently bearing an illegitimate child. Gaskell contrasts the attitudes of the Benson and Bradshaw families to make this point. The former protect Ruth and represent the caring and charitable face of Dissent. Mr Bradshaw represents its inflexibility and harshness, particularly in his condemnation of Ruth after discovering her secret, and also the inherent selfishness, and, from Gaskell's point of view, lack of true Christianity, which is at the root of this attitude. Mr Bradshaw seems as concerned that he will have lost

status in public opinion by employing Ruth as he is that she may have been ‘contaminating my innocent girls’:

“How dare you single me out, of all people, to be gulled and deceived, and pointed at through the town as the person who had taken an abandoned woman into his house to teach his daughters?”<sup>37</sup>

Jemima Bradshaw represents a mid-way attitude between the Bensons’ unconditional acceptance of Ruth and her father’s bigoted concern with his own reputation. Just as Ernestine Courtenay knew that: ‘She must break down the barriers that hedged her in from so much as a knowledge of the deadly vice’,<sup>38</sup> Jemima has always believed that social conventions, ‘the barriers’, would protect her from such knowledge:

Two hours ago - but a point of time on her mind’s dial - she had never imagined that she should ever come in contact with anyone who had committed open sin; she had never shaped her conviction into words and sentences, but still it was *there*, that all the respectable, all the family and religious circumstances of her life, would hedge her in, and guard her from ever encountering the great shock of coming face to face with vice.<sup>39</sup>

The shock of learning that she has been in close contact with someone her father judges ‘wanton’, ‘depraved’ and ‘disgusting’ gradually gives way to the realisation that:

Whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now. [...] Her horror at the wrong was not diminished; but the more she thought of the struggles the wrongdoer must have made to extricate herself, the more she felt how cruel it would be to baffle all by revealing what had been.<sup>40</sup>

Jemima’s pity for Ruth prompts her decision to protect her. This is tempered, however, by a feeling that she must also protect her younger sisters: ‘But for her sisters’ sake she had a duty to perform; she must watch Ruth.’<sup>41</sup> This is consistent with the idea that moral contamination, like physical infection, could be transferred by close or constant contact, and also with the notion that sinners, unless placed under close surveillance, as they were in reformatories, were likely to sin again.



Writing to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth in 1850, Gaskell moves from a discussion of Charlotte Brontë's Shirley (1849), in which Shirley rails against the restrictions put on single women by social conventions, to Priscilla Lydia Sellon's community at Devonport ('I am so much inclined to admire Miss Sellon's conduct in many things') to the speculation that:

...do you not think many single women would be happier if, when the ties of God's appointment were absolved by death, they found themselves some work like the Sisters of Mercy? [...] I think I see every day how women, deprived of their natural duties as wives & mothers, must look out for other duties if they wish to be at peace.<sup>42</sup>

In the same letter, Gaskell makes it plain, however, that where 'natural duties' exist, they should be paramount: neglect of such duties, in her opinion, would not only be unnatural, but contrary to divine law. Towards the end of North and South (1855) Margaret realises that:

... she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working. [...] Margaret gained the acknowledgement of her right to follow her own ideas of duty.<sup>43</sup>

Margaret has never shared her father's doubts, has remained within the Church of England and wishes to resume the work amongst the poor she had formerly carried out in Helstone and in Milton. Her cousin Edith, who relies on Margaret to help with her children, begs her not to become 'strong-minded' and 'too good to joke and be merry'.<sup>44</sup>

"And you'll not go a figure, but let me buy your dresses for you?"

"Indeed, I mean to buy them for myself. You shall come with me if you like; but no one can please me but myself."

"Oh! I was afraid you'd dress in brown and dust-colour, not to show the dirt you'll pick up in all those places. I'm glad you're going to keep one or two vanities, just by way of specimens of the old Adam."

“I’m going to be just the same, Edith, if you and my aunt could but fancy so. Only as I have neither husband nor child to give me natural duties, I must make myself some, in addition to ordering my gowns.”<sup>45</sup>

Acknowledging her lack of domestic duties, other than assisting her aunt and cousin, Margaret seeks to make herself useful elsewhere and overcomes her aunt’s objections to her plan. Edith’s reference to renouncing vanities, and to ‘dust-coloured’ clothes - a grey cloak, perhaps - would suggest that Margaret is allying herself with an Anglican Sisterhood, possibly as an Associate. To a knowledgeable contemporary reader, the combination of ‘dust-coloured clothes’ and good works by an upper-class single woman in insalubrious surroundings (‘those places’) would certainly carry the suggestion of a Sisterhood. Earlier, in a valedictory visit to Helston, disappointed by the changes that have taken place there, and feeling as if she’s in the second circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, continually whirling, Margaret contemplates the apparent stability of the heavens and wishes for peace herself:

I am in the mood in which women of another religion take the veil. I seek heavenly steadfastness in earthly monotony. If I were a Roman Catholic and could deaden my heart, stun it with some great blow, I might become a nun. But I should pine after my kind; no, not my kind, for love for my species could never fill my heart to the utter exclusion of love for individuals.<sup>46</sup>

Gaskell makes it plain that Margaret rejects a renunciation of the world with the associated idea of a vocation to devote herself to helping mankind. She is aware of the duty she owes to, and her affection for, her family (what is left of it), and additionally will not reject the possibility of marriage. Like Sister Zillah, who became an Associate of St Margaret’s, or Charlotte Yonge, an Associate of St Mary’s, Wantage, Margaret will not give up family commitments, but, having no ‘natural duties’ of her own, she finds useful work amongst those who need help and care. It was the sort of opportunity sought by Penelope Holland’s Belgravian young lady although Holland would have preferred to see the opportunity offered by some secular organisation.

In the early 1850s there were two Sisterhoods close to Margaret’s home in Harley Street - the community of All Saints, Margaret Street, to the south, and St Saviour’s, Osnaburgh Street, to the north. Both were in close proximity to areas of great poverty. Of these two communities, All Saints was still in its very early stages, whereas from 1852 St Saviour’s had been the new home of the first Sisterhood started at Park Village West in



1845. In the early 1850s it worked in close association with Miss Sellon's community in Devonport and in 1854 three of the community went to Scutari with Nightingale. Given Gaskell's inclination to admire Miss Sellon, it is possible that perhaps Osnaburgh Street was intended as the model for the charitable organisation with which Margaret allies herself.

In 1851, Gaskell had visited the Convent of Sisters of Mercy in Bermondsey. The editors of The Letters of Mrs Gaskell identify this as being 'Established under the encouragement of Pusey in the early 1840s', implying that it was an Anglican community. However, it was certainly a branch of the Mercy Convent in Baggot Street, Dublin, from which the Hull Sisters of Mercy, of the Saurin v. Starr Case, had originated.<sup>47</sup> The Bermondsey convent had been established by a group of English ladies who had joined Baggot Street in 1838, returning to England in 1839 to work amongst the London poor. They were led by Mother Mary Clare Moore, who was one of the Bermondsey Sisters who went to Scutari with Nightingale in 1854. Nightingale's very high opinion of Mother Mary has been extensively recorded.<sup>48</sup> Gaskell also expressed her admiration for the convent's work:

Bermondsey is a very bad part of London; and these Sisters have been established about 11 years, and have done a great deal of good and established a great large school. We went all over the Convent heard all their plans and altogether I think I like it even better than the Convent of the Good Shepherd.<sup>49</sup>

The Bermondsey convent was not, then, the first that Gaskell had visited. There was a Roman Catholic Convent of the Good Shepherd at Hammersmith, with a reformatory attached to it and also a home for delinquent children. The work carried out here was to be much admired by Margaret Goodman some ten years later.<sup>50</sup> As Gaskell expressed an interest in reformatory work elsewhere in her letters it is not unlikely that she could have visited it - her interest in such communities extended to visiting the (Protestant) *Maison des Diaconesses* in Paris<sup>51</sup> and circulating information about Kaiserswerth.<sup>52</sup> The Good Shepherd nuns' methods with their inmates, which Goodman describes as firm, but gentle and forgiving, were similar to those at Kaiserswerth as described by Elizabeth Sewell.

Gaskell was not at all opposed to her own daughters helping the poor, and seems, from her letters to have encouraged them to do so.<sup>53</sup> Her extreme tolerance of branches of Christianity other than her own Unitarianism is expressed in the underlying ecumenicism of



North and South. It is most apparent in the chapter 'Comfort in Sorrow': 'Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm.'<sup>54</sup> The ecumenicism of the text is further underlined by the marriage of Frederick Hale to a Roman Catholic and the almost Eucharistic sharing of food between Thornton and his men, and further reinforced by the suggestion that Margaret allies herself with a minority faction of the Established Church.

### **Margaret Oliphant**

Margaret Oliphant includes Sisterhoods occasionally in her fiction, but remains ambivalent about them neither endorsing nor condemning, and although she may trivialize them, does not appear antagonistic. Elisabeth Jay claims that she 'could see the value of religious sisterhoods in as far as they provided restorative companionship to which the wounded could make temporary retreat'.<sup>55</sup> To provide bolt holes for the stressed middle classes had not been part of the original intentions of the founders of Sisterhoods. However, the development of the role of Associate Sisters - women who were not able to join a Sisterhoods but who worked with it in the best way they could - and the increasing emphasis placed on the contemplative aspect of the religious life led to the institution of retreats at many communities. Charlotte Yonge includes retreats at Sisterhoods in her fiction by the 1870s.<sup>56</sup>

If anything, Oliphant seems to regard Sisterhoods with amused detachment and makes use of them to serve the purposes of plot and theme. Thus in Cárita (1877) a dilettante young man who dabbles superficially in the arts is attracted to a postulant of an Anglican order because of her resemblance to a favourite Italian painting. Enthusing about her to his confidante he uses the language of art criticism, drawing direct comparisons with Renaissance painting. His seeking out and pursuit of the postulant are described almost in the terms of a knightly quest with the irony that, when he at last finds his 'Madonna' she is not the soulful saint of his imagination, but engaged in coarse physical labour. Oliphant is also poking fun at the popular romantic image of Sisterhoods as being places of cloistered repose, which she undercuts by depicting some of their more unpleasant work.

The High Church hero of The Perpetual Curate (1864), Frank Wentworth, having transformed his church into a model of Tractarianism and Ritual, has become the mentor of a lay Sisterhood. This seems to consist of 'some half dozen people of the very *élite* of



society, principally ladies residing in Grange Lane'.<sup>57</sup> Typically, Wentworth's Sisterhood attracts upper- middle-class ladies with the time and inclination for good works and ritualism. His ladies wear an identifying uniform of grey cloaks and assist the curate with his work with the poor of Wharfside. The only two who are identified, or shown going about their duties, are Lucy Wodehouse and her much older sister. The Rector of Carlingford disapproves of Sisterhoods from the theological aspect ('they are founded on a mistake'<sup>58</sup>). His wife, whom he married when they were both relatively old, was evidently a member of a Sisterhood when they first met and gave up as soon as she discovered his views on the subject; for Frank and Lucy it would appear to be the means of bringing them together.

Although Oliphant makes fun of the externals of Ritualism - 'floral ornaments and ecclesiastical upholstery'<sup>59</sup> - she also emphasises the seriousness of Wentworth's work with the poor. The only people in Carlingford who know or care anything about Wharfside, apart from the perpetual curate and his Sisterhood are the 'overseers of the poor and guardians of the public peace'.<sup>60</sup> Those who choose to be ignorant include the minister of Salem Chapel, leader of the predominately lower middle-class Dissenters. For all the effete nature of its outward show, Tractarianism is shown to be a positive force for good. This is illustrated by the two sermons Frank preaches on Easter Day: the sermon at the fashionable 'High' St Roque's chapel is about 'the Church and her beautiful institution of Easter',<sup>61</sup> the sermon to the rough working people of Wharfside is about the true meaning of Easter, the Resurrection and the Life.<sup>62</sup>

The grey cloaks of which the Rector disapproves are also a subject for humorous criticism. The founders of the early Sisterhoods were criticised for insisting upon, if not habits, initially, then a distinctive, plain and sober-coloured style of dress.<sup>63</sup> Their response was that such clothing would make them easily identifiable as friends and helpers when they visited slum areas, and would protect them from insult. As Sister Dora discovered in the slums of Walsall, this was not always the case and critics of Sisterhoods regarded the view that distinctive dress offered some protection as naive, romantic and even dangerous, nonsense. The elder Miss Wodehouse also has her doubts:

The unruly children and gossiping mothers at the poor doors discomposed her sadly, and she was not near so sure that her grey cloak defended her from



all rudeness as she pretended to be when assenting to the enthusiasm of Mr Wentworth and Lucy.<sup>64</sup>

The grey cloaks, which Frank's Evangelical aunt immediately associates with nunneries,<sup>65</sup> also serve to cover up the incipient romance between Frank and Lucy Wodehouse. Lucy hides her blue ribbons, symbolic of her emotional state, beneath her cloak.<sup>66</sup>

In Oliphant's For Love and Life (1874) Augusta Thornleigh (Gussy) is an Associate of an Anglican Sisterhood. Like Lucy Robarts, she has been temporarily disappointed in love, but unlike Lucy she is able to take herself away and work out her emotions through organised prayer and social work (rather than the starving and flogging imagined by Lucy). For Love and Life, by examining Augusta's Associateship through the eyes of her ex-lover and her family, raises some of the issues connected with Sisterhoods which were still current in the 1870s. The problem of whether or not to marry, and what unmarried women were to do with their lives was still much discussed.<sup>67</sup>

Contrary to Trollope's assertion that marriage was the only option for a normal, healthy girl, Oliphant speculates on the religious life as a viable alternative. Gussy's uncle puts forward a pragmatic case for Sisterhoods:

“I suppose there comes a time in a girl's life, as well as a man's, when she wants to be herself, and not merely her father's daughter. You may say she should marry in that case; but supposing she doesn't want to marry, or, put the case, can't marry as she would wish? What can she do? I think myself they overdo the devotional part; but a Sisterhood means occupation, a kind of independence, a position of her own - and at the same time protection from all the folly we talk about strong-minded women.”<sup>68</sup>

Sisterhoods are seen as a protection against 'idiotic talk about strong-minded women' - a way in which women can achieve quietly in, for example, medicine<sup>69</sup> and teaching without bringing down criticism upon themselves for being unwomanly, or wanting to usurp the authority of men. Some women who entered a Sisterhood were not necessarily self-sacrificing, but rather saw it as a means of fulfilment. Susan Mumm claims that Anglican choir sisters typically came from upper or middle-class backgrounds, with strong representation from clergy families, and that a considerable number of these were related to men of influence in Victorian society. Barred from emulating their male relatives because of their gender, they sought power and influence through the Sisterhood movement. Mumm



also notes that the Englishwoman's Journal regularly included Sisterhoods in its list of career opportunities.<sup>70</sup>

As in Cárita, Oliphant is presenting an alternative to the accepted fictional images of conventual life promoted by anti-Catholic literature - both to the faux-mediaeval idea of a life of decorative uselessness, and to the image of austerity and asceticism which Lucy Robarts associates with 'homes':

The melancholy seclusion, which to an English mind is the first characteristic of a convent, has little to do with the busy beehive of a modern sisterhood ...<sup>71</sup>

Like Maude Deerswood's family, Gussy's parents agree to her Associateship in the hope that Gussy will be content and not want to enter the Sisterhood on a permanent basis. Her mother worries continually about the 'evil, physical and moral' with which Gussy must invariably come into contact, and, like the mother in Penelope Holland's 'Two Girls of the Period' article, about 'the risk of infection to which she would expose herself'.<sup>72</sup> These more serious worries are counterbalanced by concern for Gussy's 'hands and complexion', a reference to the manual work that she might be undertaking.<sup>73</sup>

There is an obvious difference here between the appreciation of the danger in which Ernestine Courtenay deliberately places herself, and the social opprobrium she faces, shown by Skene (a committed Anglo-Catholic), and the more trivial attitude demonstrated by Gussy's mother as presented by Oliphant (a nominal Anglican).

Although Oliphant, while not specific about the exact work that Gussy does, suggests that Sisterhoods are a positive option for unmarried women, she also uses them as a romantic device, to the point of eroticizing their dress. Edgar continually thinks about the Associate with whom he travelled on the Edinburgh train and is obsessed with the fact that she was cloaked and heavily veiled, so that the only part of her body he could see was her 'little white hand stealing from under the cover of her cloak'.<sup>74</sup> Later he accuses Gussy, who was the Associate, of kissing him in the railway carriage. Oliphant is here perhaps making the association between the convent and the harem, common in anti-Roman Catholic propaganda, which was loosely based on connecting ideas of physical confinement and distinctive clothing. As shown in chapter three, writers of such propaganda often referred

to convents as seraglios for priests, and speculated pruriently on what went on behind convent walls.<sup>75</sup>

Dinah Mulock Craik, who gave her views on Anglican Sisterhoods in On Sisterhoods, would have concurred with Oliphant in preferring the ‘busy beehive of a modern sisterhood’ to the ‘melancholy seclusion’ associated with Roman Catholic convents. In her novel, Olive (1850), the eponymous heroine is shown to reject the notion of a convent as a retreat from the world, as an existence of ‘quiet monotony, without pleasure and without pain’ considering it better to engage with the outside world to do what good one can there:

There is something far greater and holier in a woman who goes about the world, keeping ever her pure nun’s heart sacred to Heaven, and to some human memories; not shrinking from her appointed work, but doing it meekly and diligently, hour by hour, through life’s long day; waiting until at eve God lifts the burden off, saying, “Faithful handmaid, sleep!”<sup>76</sup>

Olive’s illegitimate half-sister, Christal, shuts herself away from the world in the convent when she discovers the shame of her birth, preferring the seclusion ‘without pleasure and without pain’ to facing the derision and hostility she would be exposed to in society. Craik is sympathetic towards the nuns, implying that they do much good, but also that their life, protected from normal adversity, makes them simple and childish.

### **Emma Jane Worboise**

Novelists who were antithetical towards Ritualism and everything connected with it tended to associate it closely with Roman Catholicism in their work. These included the staunchly Non-Conformist Emma Jane Worboise, who was deeply opposed to both Ritualism and Evangelicalism and indeed to the Church of England as a whole, with some allowances made for the Broad Church. Most of her work is pro-Methodist rather than anti-Catholic, but where she is concerned with the latter she makes it plain that Anglo-Catholicism is just a very short step from the Church of Rome. Thus, in The House of Bondage (1873) an Evangelical clergyman of low social origins, recently enriched by marriage, turns at first Ritualist, in keeping he feels with his new-found social status, and eventually tumbles into the ‘swamp of Romanism’. His well-bred, effeminate, Ritualist



curate is a great attraction for 'silly girls' with too much time on their hands.<sup>77</sup> The clergyman, Charles Pettifer, is refused £500 by his hitherto dotting wife because she thinks he may want it to start a Sisterhood, which she sees as an excuse for clerical flirting, 'philandering with a set of silly women'.<sup>78</sup> Instead of offering useful work, Anglo-Catholicism is encouraging excitable behaviour unsuitable and unhealthy for unmarried young ladies.

Overdale; or, The Story of a Pervert (1869) deals with the insidious influence of Roman Catholicism on individual members of a family, and the schism and heartbreak it causes. A widowed Anglo-Catholic clergyman, Eustace Aymler, marries his children's governess, Agatha. He proceeds to become increasingly 'Romish' in his views, refusing to eat meat on Fridays, for example, and introducing ritual into his church.<sup>79</sup> His daughter from his first marriage, Rosamund, follows his leadership, 'her dress was severely simple[all black, a cross and no crinoline], and might have passed for the regulation-robos of some new-fangled order, or Anglican sisterhood'.<sup>80</sup> Eustace is persuaded by his mentor, Mr Vallence (a disguised Roman Catholic) that his second marriage, despite producing several children (including a daughter called Maude), is wrong and his true destiny lies in celibacy and the Roman priesthood. There is a reference here perhaps to the Connelly case of 1848-51: Pierce Connelly, a married man with three children, became a Roman Catholic priest, having convinced his wife that she should become a nun. Not receiving the preferment in the Church he had hoped for, Connelly later instituted proceedings for the restitution of conjugal rights.<sup>81</sup>

Posing as a Ritualist clergyman with aristocratic and insinuating manners, Mr Vallence not only manages to persuade gullible women that Ritualism is the religious preference of the fashionable elite, but also hears confession from the more susceptible and asks them questions of an intimate, perhaps indecent, nature.<sup>82</sup> Eustace consequently separates from Agatha, who dies, and goes into retreat where letters from his family are withheld from him.<sup>83</sup> Rosamund joins a Roman convent, and her friend Ada joins an Anglican Sisterhood. Both are very unhappy, Rosamund more so, and cut off from their families.<sup>84</sup> Eustace eventually repents and rejoins the remnants of his family, but Rosamund is lost forever in the convent. A scene where Agatha and her young charges are trapped on the cliffs by a rising tide is remarkably similar, although without fatalities, to an incident in



Charlotte M Yonge's The Castlebuilders (1854) showing perhaps that the same device could be used for different theological ends.

Father Fabian, The Monk of Malham Tower (1875) further blurs the distinction between Ritualism and Roman Catholicism. Indeed, Tractarians are worse than Romanists because they're really Romanists masquerading as Protestants.<sup>85</sup> Anglo-Catholicism is only a 'disguised Popery' intended to bring the Church of England back 'to what she was before the Reformation'.<sup>86</sup> The Jesuit Father Fabian passes himself off as a Tractarian clergyman of 'advanced views', and uses these views to worm his way into the confidence and the benefice of the recently bereaved General Seaton.<sup>87</sup> However, the General does not accept all Father Fabian's proposed innovations: 'The person who tried to confess my womankind would be a bold man. I would horsewhip him for a Papist priest in disguise.'<sup>88</sup> Sisterhoods and convents also come in for criticism: the General's estate is near the town of St Ulpha's:

There was a famous religious house for nuns at St Ulpha's, and there are some mighty queer tales about the pranks they played with the monks.<sup>89</sup>

Not only does the General deliver a tirade against Roman Catholic convents enticing heiresses<sup>90</sup> - a popular plot device in anti-Catholic fiction (Beatrice and Father Eustace) for example, and also a reference to real-life scandals, most notably that of Miss Talbot<sup>91</sup> - but also refers to 'an old friend of mine who is breaking her heart because her only daughter persists in joining an Anglican sisterhood.'<sup>92</sup> In the light of the recent Parliamentary Inquiry into monastical institutions in Great Britain, Worboise makes much of the fact that religious houses are 'unregulated' and '*uninspected*'. The General's nephew, Aubrey (who in the course of the novel converts from Roman Catholicism to Methodism) believes that they should be, 'duly registered, and under strict Government inspection. Like gaols, lunatic asylums, workhouses, ...'.<sup>93</sup> Both the governess of the General's daughter, Mam'selle Annette, and Father Fabian's housekeeper, Mrs Darcy, are nuns in disguise (Sister Augustine and Mother Bridget respectively). Worboise also subscribes to the belief that Roman Catholics were encouraged to lie, 'Mam'selle Annette would have sworn black was white if commanded to by her spiritual advisors'.<sup>94</sup> At the end of the novel, the General's daughter, Beatrice, trained in Romish deceit by Mam'selle Annette at an early age, is drowned as a result of habitual deceit and disobedience, the estate thereby passes to the Methodist Aubrey (who has a Roman Catholic brother and sister called Eustace and Maude



- these names constantly recur in fiction as being appropriate to Roman and Anglo-Catholics, I have no idea why).

In terms of plot and theme Father Fabian seems to owe much to Mrs Trollope's Father Eustace, A Tale of the Jesuits (1847): both Father Fabian and Father Eustace are Jesuits living in towers with housekeepers who are disguised nuns and very fond of their food (Father Eustace's housekeeper dies from overindulgence). Both Fabian and Eustace are plotting the conversion of, and subsequent acquisition of a fortune from, the heiress of a wealthy neighbouring family they have befriended. Having failed, they are threatened with imprisonment, torture and death by their Jesuit leaders (Father Eustace in fact suffers for several years) and both make deathbed renunciations of Roman Catholicism and all it stands for.

### **Eliza Lynn Linton - Under Which Lord?**

Eliza Lynn Linton's Under Which Lord? (1879) also deals with the issues of Tractarianism causing alienation from the family and eventually leading to Roman Catholicism. She regards the High Church as essentially hypocritical and self-seeking, and also as preying on the emotions of the weak-minded and needy. The Honourable Reverend Launcelot Lascelles seeks to recruit wealthy landowner Hermione Fullerton to the Ritualist cause, not so much for the salvation of her soul, Linton implies, but for funding for the aggrandisement of his sect (and by connection, himself) in the rebuilding and restoration of church lands on her property which were laid waste by the Reformation. Hermione's husband, Richard, is a free-thinker and amateur scientist and, as such, antithetical towards Lascelles, but initially unwilling to interfere with his wife's beliefs. Lascelles manages to insinuate himself between husband and wife, not sexually as might be implied by his name (although her name of course implies her essential purity), but spiritually, and persuades her to part with large sums of money for his schemes.

Lascelles' sister, a member of an Anglican Sisterhood (the Order of the Mother of Dolours) helps him in the parish. Her aristocratic connections are typical of many Sisters and Linton notes ironically that she believes her social standing ensures her spiritual superiority: 'she never quite forgot she was the Honourable Miss Lascelles condescending to humility'.<sup>95</sup> Sister Agnes influences Richard and Hermione's daughter, Virginia, and encourages a doctrine of reserve in her, alienating her from her parents.<sup>96</sup>



Lascelles himself exerts an unhealthy influence over other parishioners - the effeminate Cuthbert Molyneux's appearance and character imply that he is as malleable as Hermione and therefore equally susceptible to Lascelle's influence.<sup>97</sup> His unmarried sister and aunt, Theresa and Catherine, develop an extreme religious enthusiasm which Linton ascribes to suppressed lust for Lascelles, and indicates by the significance of their names.<sup>98</sup> Confession is introduced into the parish church, disguised as 'private discussion' after service.<sup>99</sup> The sexual overtones of Theresa's 'confession' are underlined by Lascelles holding and kissing her as a supposed act of forgiveness - she thinks it's spiritual ecstasy, but he knows it's sex.<sup>100</sup> There is an obvious reference here to Maudsley's assertion that there was a connection between religious enthusiasm in unmarried women and suppressed sexuality. He claimed that the visions of St Theresa and St Catherine of Sienna 'in which they believed themselves received as veritable spouses into the bosom of Christ and transported into an unspeakable ecstasy by the touch of His sacred lips' were instances of 'the influence of excited sexual organs of the mind'.<sup>101</sup> Linton shows how Lascelles deliberately manipulates Theresa emotionally, by alternately praising her and paying her attention, and then ignoring her, eventually driving her into a state of near-madness.

Hermione and Virginia are encouraged by Lascelles to devote time to working for the church. Initially this takes the form of embroidery,<sup>102</sup> but later Virginia and Theresa start cleaning the church.<sup>103</sup> The sight of ladies behaving like charwomen is extremely distressing to those parishioners of similar rank who have not succumbed to Lascelle's influence and raises discussions about the morality and risks to health of ladies voluntarily degrading themselves. Lascelles encourages his adherents not only to attend as many services as possible, and to call him 'Superior', but to practice fasting and penance. Theresa Molyneux carries this to such an extreme that she makes herself ill and dies raving, the result, it is implied, of sexual/religious hysteria.

Lascelle's influence over Hermione eventually leads her to give him large sums of money for a convalescent home to be run by Sister Agnes' order, without consulting her husband. The home is run inefficiently and uneconomically (an accusation frequently made against many of Miss Sellon's enterprises) and is a tremendous drain on Hermione's estate, which had previously been productively managed by Richard. When Richard tries to assert paternal authority over Virginia she replies that she should obey only the church, particularly when the father in question is a free-thinker.<sup>104</sup> In Anglo-Catholic terms, of course, the



rejection of the authority of a Godless father and the substitution of the Church, or its representative, would have been as acceptable, given the circumstances, as Ernestine Courtenay's rejection of her fiancé when she discovers his unworthiness. For Linton, however, it is unnatural and representative of how virtuoso religion perverts its adherents and alienates them from normal affections. Virginia, Sister Agnes and Cuthbert Molyneux go over to Rome and Virginia and Sister Agnes enter a convent. Lascelles makes an advantageous marriage which distances him from his followers. Hermione and Richard separate, but are reconciled in time for him to make a bold agnostic death. Widowed and impoverished, Hermione is forced to let her home and live on the Continent. At the end of the novel Hermione sees Virginia behind the screen of a church in Rome and is left to ponder her own foolishness.

### Charles Kingsley

Charles Kingsley displayed a rabid antagonism towards the Roman Catholic church all his life, culminating in his battle-by pamphlet with Newman in 1864. He perceived Roman Catholicism as dishonest and perverse, particularly in its promotion of virginity and celibacy as spiritually superior states. There is no such thing as a good Roman, or even Anglo-, Catholic in Charles Kingsley's writing - in Westward Ho! (1855) for example, he refers to Roman Catholic priests who make a stand against their church's practices as 'True Protestants' and 'true liberals'.<sup>105</sup> The exception might be Frank Headley, in Two Years Ago (1857), a pale, if moderately muscular, example of Anglo-Catholicism. Kingsley's distrust of Roman Catholicism was always very emphatic, as in, for example, his description of two of the formative saints of monastic life:

Look at St Francis de Sales's [*sic*] or St Vincent de Paul's face - & then say, does not your English spirit loathe to be such a prayer-mongering eunuch as that?<sup>106</sup>

He was equally unrelenting about modern Roman and Anglo-Catholics, expressing his opinion of Newman, or it might be Pusey, in 1851:

So far from siding with Dr. ----, he is, in my eyes one of the most harmful men now in England; and ---- in spite of his real holiness and purity, is not the man to whom I would intrust anyone I love. In him, and in all that school, there is an element of foppery - even in dress and manner; a fastidious, maundering, die-away effeminacy, which is mistaken for purity and refinement; and I confess myself unable to cope with it.<sup>107</sup>

The 'effeminacy' of the Roman Catholic church, which he believed to be imitated by Anglo-Catholicism, seems to have inspired Charles' antagonism possibly more than any other perceived aspect. It would have been a direct contradiction of his own 'muscular Christianity' - the ethos of Tom Brown's Schooldays - where masculinity and aggressive muscularity were prized above introspection, intelligence and obvious piety, although the latter was afforded respect if expressed in an acceptable way.<sup>108</sup> Boys who were good at games were evidently born to be leaders of men; boys who were bad at games, who were physically, and therefore probably morally, weaker, were naturally subservient to them. A church dependent on the 'fastidious, maundering, die-away effeminacy' of a celibate clergy had obviously gone radically wrong somewhere, and any attempt to imitate it was obviously a mistake.

Charles' antipathy towards the Roman Catholic church is perhaps best expressed in Westward Ho! where his dislike of its 'femininity' is teamed with objections to Mariolatry (which encourages 'femininity'), deceit and hypocrisy, and the absolute power of the celibate priestly hierarchy. The novel's hero, Amyas Leigh, is a perfect example of the 'muscular Christian' hero, being addicted both to violence and to Protestant truth. Charles contrasts Amyas with his Roman Catholic cousin, Eustace, to emphasise the difference between the two creeds, as in their first meeting in the novel:

... Amyas faced right round, and looked him full in the face, with the heartiest of smiles, and held out a lion's paw, which Eustace took rapturously, and a great shaking of hands ensued; Amyas gripping with a great round fist, and a quiet quiver thereof, as much as to say, "I am glad to see you;" and Eustace pinching hard with quite straight fingers, and sawing the air violently up and down, as much as to say, "*Don't you see* how glad I am to see you?" A very different greeting from the former.<sup>109</sup>

The Protestant Amyas is frank and open-hearted, whereas Eustace is constrained, suspicious and guarded, a result of Jesuitical training at Rheims, and symptomatic generally of the



effects of Catholicism; the ‘don’t you see’ being an implied criticism of the outward show of Roman Catholicism, which potentially concealed something less friendly and more sinister. Amyas’s (genuine) pleasure at the meeting is restrained but sincere, expressed by his ‘quiet quiver’. His hand is a ‘lion’s paw’, the hand of the British Lion with its associated symbolism of courage and dignity. Eustace’s fingers are ‘quite straight’, making Amyas hold on, and with the implication of an unwillingness to engage himself fully in the exchange of pleasantries.

The difference between the two men, representative of their respective creeds, is something to which Charles returns continually throughout the text to emphasise what he perceived as the inherent dishonesty of Catholicism. The encounter between Amyas and Eustace finishes with a direct address to the reader:

I have tried to hint to you two opposite sorts of men. The one trying to be good with all his might and main, according to certain approved methods and rules, which he has got by heart; and like a weak oarsman, feeling and fingering his spiritual muscles over all day, to see if they are growing. The other, not even knowing whether his is good or not, but just doing the right thing without thinking about it, as simply as a little child, because the Spirit of God is with him. If you cannot see the great gulf fixed between the two, I trust that you will discover it some day.<sup>110</sup>

Eustace the Catholic is given to introspection, to self-doubt and self-justification by any available means. Although he is handsome, he is not physically able and uses underhand means in a fight. The Roman Catholic church, correspondingly, is superficial, relying on the outward show of ritual, and because it has little of substance to offer, it has to resort to subtlety and deceit. Amyas the Protestant, as the representative of his church, has been properly taught, is unquestioning about the goodness of God and his own self-worth, and is horribly physically fit and skilled in various types of fighting. Because the Protestant church (and by this Kingsley means a very specific type of Broad Church Anglicanism) is backed by basic Christian truth, because it boldly proclaims the body of the living Christ it can afford to be open and up front: *mens sana in corpore sano*. Later in the narrative, Kingsley refers to Catholic priests as ‘smuggling sinful souls up the backstairs into heaven’ but Anglican priests ‘make men good Christians by making them good men, good gentlemen, and good Englishmen’.<sup>111</sup> The majority of Catholics can never be thorough-going English gentlemen because their allegiance is not to the English church, personified by Queen



Elizabeth, but to Rome, personified by the Virgin Mary. As Kingsley has one of his characters say: 'They pray to a woman, the idolatrous rascals! and no wonder they fight like women!'<sup>112</sup>

For Kingsley, a religion based on the avoidance of simple truth affected its communicants so that dishonesty permeated their whole being. Emotional dishonesty makes them incapable of self-control - whereas Amyas and the Brotherhood of the Rose hide their feelings for Rose Salterne, Eustace is driven first to declare himself, then to assault her and consequently to swear vengeance when she repulses him. This innate dishonesty manifests itself materially as well as spiritually. The Bishop of Carthage has hoarded treasure for himself, in direct contradiction of the teaching of Christ, but still preaches against the evil of riches.<sup>113</sup>

Charles Kingsley saw Anglo-Catholicism as following the bad example of Rome particularly in the re-establishment of female monasticism, and consequently life-long celibacy for women. His objections to celibacy were based not only on a belief that it debased the state of matrimony - for him a sacred institution - but also that it was fundamentally self-seeking and the resort of the morally weak. He applied the same criterion to teetotalism so that a man who refused wholesome English beer on the grounds that he never drank alcohol was spineless and weak-willed. Anyone with any moral fibre should be able to control the amount he drank without descending into drunkenness: those who refused alcohol were afraid of losing self-control and were therefore moral cowards.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, a man or woman who renounced marriage and the world to embrace the monastic life was afraid of undertaking the physical demands of marriage and the responsibilities of family life. They were also selfishly motivated by concern for their own souls, rather than those of others, and a desire for the spiritual superiority they believed would be conferred by celibacy. Monasticism, in Kingsley's view, was escapist and offered unlimited scope for self-centredness - even the practice of self-denial was a perverse form of self-gratification. In women this selfishness was amplified because he saw them as seeking to escape the God-given duty of motherhood - the responsibility of caring for and educating young Christian souls - and the duty they owed to their family to conform to a parentally prescribed regime. Kingsley's view of conventualism as escapist is rather at odds with most contemporaneous fiction which saw it rather as confining.



His first published work, The Saint's Tragedy (1848), attacked Catholic notions of celibacy as well as the power of the priesthood. It was originally intended as a prose life of St Elizabeth of Hungary to be given to Kingsley's wife on their wedding night. Previous to their marriage he had written to her: 'I have begun the life of the only (I think) healthy Popish saint, St Elizabeth of Bohemia ...'<sup>115</sup> By the time it was published it had become a five-act blank verse drama (preface by F D Maurice), more or less Shakespearean in concept, if not in execution.

Kingsley's Introduction to The Saint's Tragedy presented St Elizabeth as the victim of a belief that true holiness cannot be achieved by the non-celibate, that the celebration of family life is an obstacle to God - the same belief that convinced Worboise's Eustace Aymler that he could not serve God properly as a married man. Kingsley believed that Elizabeth's behaviour during her marriage, performing her role as wife and mother and giving alms, nursing the poor, etc., was more effective and more expressive of the spirit of Christ than her efforts in her widowhood under her spiritual director when she was starved and scourged to death at the age of 24 in order to purge body and soul of the 'vile pleasures of her carnal wedlock'.<sup>116</sup> The Introduction talks of:

... the struggle between healthy human affection, and Manichean contempt with which a celibate clergy would have all men regard the names of husband, wife and parent. To exhibit this latter falsehood in its miserable consequences, when received into a heart of insight and determination sufficient to follow out all belief to its ultimate practice, is the main object of my Poem.<sup>117</sup>

The Saint's Tragedy was the manifesto against celibacy, and consequently monasticism, that Charles adhered to all of his life. It included most of his major objections: that it debased women by detracting from their role as wife and mother; that it denigrated the family and sacredness of family ties; that by the promoting the cult of virginity it elevated the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, above God himself, thereby weakening the leadership of Jesus and creating a 'feminine' church. He suggested that celibacy, being both unnatural and unhealthy in suppressing natural desire, promoted moral perverseness amongst the priesthood. The monastic life, as described by Conrad, St Elizabeth's spiritual director, offered freedom from responsibility and automatic spiritual glory with promised visions of female saints couched in sensual language:



Entangled in the Magdalen's tresses lie;  
 Dream hours before her picture, till thy lips  
 Dare to approach her feet, ...<sup>118</sup>

In Kingsley's *Yeast*, the heroine, Argemone, considers entering 'a Church-of-England *béguinage*, or quasi-Protestant nunnery', and Kingsley believed that her motives, however well meant, were ultimately selfish:

She had taken up the fancy of becoming a Sister of Charity, not as Honoria might have done, from genuine love of the poor, but from a "sense of duty". Almsgiving and visiting the sick were one of the methods of earning heaven prescribed by her new creed. She was ashamed of her own laziness by the side of Honoria's simple benevolence; and sad though it may be to say it, she longed to outdo her by some signal act of benevolence.<sup>119</sup>

Honoria's 'simple benevolence' has Kingsley's approval because she is working from within the family, with the blessing of her parents and of the local clergyman; her good works are in effect male-led. She is also working within a loosely-defined extended family circle, looking after the poor on her father's estate or local to it. Argemone wishes to leave the domestic circle and join a community of women nominally self-governing but influenced by a celibate clergyman (his celibacy in this case making his masculinity suspect)). For Kingsley this is redolent of perversion (in both the spiritual and sexual senses), as Argemone seeks to desert a branch of her religion led by the Son of God for one where Mariolatry is in the ascendant; where the natural order of God speaking to man and man speaking to woman is being quietly subverted. Eventually, of course, Argemone comes to her senses and longs for a strong manly bosom on which to lay her head, accepting both the spiritual leadership of male-led Anglicanism and the sexual leadership of Lancelot. Equally, Lancelot refuses the comfort of the Virgin offered to him by his Roman Catholic convert cousin's spiritual leader, saying that he is a man and requires the leadership of a man.<sup>120</sup>

The Anglo-Catholic priest who encourages Argemone to become a Sister of Charity promotes it through a correspondence forbidden by Argemone's mother, who is opposed to the idea. Kingsley sees this as symptomatic of the deceit underlying Catholicism and as an example of how the Church attempted to cause schism in the family unit to strengthen its



own hold on its followers. From Kingsley's point of view, the family is encompassed by the larger organism of the Anglican church; a family within a family and a microcosm of the greater patriarchate.

### Maude

If writers such as Skene and Sewell actively promoted Anglo-Catholic values in their fiction, the memoirs of ex-Sisters frequently gave dire warning as to where adherence to those values might lead. Of those that appeared in the 1860s and 1870s, one of the most vehement is Maude; or, The Anglican Sister of Mercy (1869). Although claiming to be the true story of a young woman's experiences in an Anglican Sisterhood some 20 years earlier, striking similarities to the Saurin v. Starr case would suggest that the narrative has been tampered with to suit the purposes of its editor. Maude pertains to be the history of a 'personal and intimate friend' of its editor, Elizabeth Whately, daughter of Archbishop Whately of Dublin.<sup>121</sup> Whately is very free with editorial comment, directing the reader towards the 'proper', i.e. anti-conventual, conclusions to be drawn from Maude's experiences. The preface, dated September 1869, clearly displays some of the anti-convent paranoia which accompanied the aftermath of the Saurin v Starr trial earlier that year, and which led to the consequent Government inquiry into monastical establishments. Whately reflects the fear of those in the anti-Catholic, anti-conventual camp that Anglican sisterhoods were little more than a device for the gradual Romanizing of well brought up women, and symptomatic of the insidious influence and subterfuge, redolent of Roman Catholicism, practised by Anglo-Catholics. She declares herself acquainted with the 'true condition and secret working' of Anglican Sisterhoods and 'unveils the secret tactics' of those hoping to restore Romish practices. The purpose of these 'memoirs' would seem to be to align Anglican and Roman Catholic institutions in the public consciousness and to examine issues raised by any similarities:

... the really important question to the public is, whether the doctrines thus promulgated are, or are not, identical with the monastic system of the Church of Rome? ... whether the English people will encourage and sanction the growth of institutions in this country, which, even in a social point of view, are now regarded, even in Roman Catholic countries, as utterly fatal to their well-being?.<sup>122</sup>

Whately also states in the Preface that her father, Archbishop Whately, considered Maude's story so important that he had urged its publication, and, but for his death would have edited it himself.<sup>123</sup> Although Whately states that Maude's narrative 'took place 20 years ago' there is no indication when her experiences were actually recorded.<sup>124</sup> Also, if the Archbishop was so concerned that her story be told, the delay of six years after his death before publication seems rather long. It would seem that Maude was written after February 1869 and the scandal of the Convent Case, and that there is a strong element of related propaganda in the interpretation of Maude's experiences, both in the particular incidents used and in Whately's editorial comment. If initial expectations of *Saurin v. Starr* were based on ignorance and anti-conventual propaganda, then Maude seems to have been based on, or influenced by, what the case revealed about day-to-day convent life.

At no point does Whately pretend to impartiality, being contemptuously dismissive of Ritualism right from the start, describing it as 'scenic decoration and medieval millinery'.<sup>125</sup> Maude Deerswood, 'the daughter of a gentleman of family and good position' is drawn to the idea of a life of service following her inability to come to terms with the death of her brother-in-law.<sup>126</sup> Enquiries are made to a 'Protestant Sisterhood' through a friend and a correspondence is initiated between Maude and the Mother Superior in which Mother Angelica, like the Superior in Yeast, encourages Maude to be evasive towards her mother and attempts to arrange a meeting without her knowledge - a suggestion that Maude ignores. Whately uses only letters from the Superior and not Maude's replies, and comments on them:

[...] the strength and plausibility of these letters lies in their being so nearly true. All that is said of single-hearted devotedness to God and close following of Christ, is in itself right; the fallacy which Maude very naturally overlooked consists in ignoring that this devotedness to God can only be acceptable to Him when it leads us to follow His leading, not our own, to do "what our hand findeth to do", not what our will chooseth. He has given us home ties and duties; and to set these aside for work planned and devised by ourselves is not in reality following Him, but following ourselves.<sup>127</sup>

The implication here is that the Superior is employing the sort of sophistry usually associated with the Jesuits, that she is emphasising some aspects of God's teaching and playing down others to suit her own purposes. The point that Whately is making, and which recurs throughout the narrative, is that eventually the Sisterhood will try to lure away



Maude's loyalties from her family to the convent. It was a point that was made by the prosecution in the Convent Case - that once a woman entered a convent she was expected to sever all ties with her family, and much disapprobation of this was expressed during the trial, particularly by the Lord Chief Justice who was very surprised that it should be so. Whately blames it on 'the cultivation of the ascetic mode of life' which alienates natural family affections, and Sisterhoods were frequently accused of attracting women away from the duties and responsibilities owed to their families. Miss Sellon of Devonport, in particular, was charged with claiming that, 'the love of home is another idol,- a very sweet and honourable one, but one which, alas, comes often between us and high duties to our church, the poor, and our Lord himself.'<sup>128</sup>

Like Gussy Thornleigh and Ernestine Courtenay, Maude experiences opposition from her family. Her age is never stated and she appears to have reasonable freedom of mobility, being allowed to study poor relief by *Soeurs de Charité* in Paris (as did Florence Nightingale), but she acknowledges her mother's right to her obedience and, despite her conviction of her vocation, is at first reluctant to take any steps without her mother's consent. Permission for an initial three-month visit to the Sisterhood at Westonbury is only given because Maude confesses herself strangely drawn to Roman Catholicism and her mother, like Gussy Thornleigh's, considers a Sisterhood the lesser of two evils. Whately comments that this is not carrying out Scriptural precepts for honouring parents.<sup>129</sup>

Once away from the influence of her family, Maude is under the convent Rule and owes absolute obedience to her Superior. When her mother will not consent to her being fully received into the community, Maude is made a 'grey sister' of indeterminate status, thereby avoiding the need for parental approval - a further instance of Sisterhoods undermining the rights of the family, and of Jesuitical sly practice.

The Sisterhood which Maude joins is at 'Westonbury' under the leadership of Mother Angelica. It is very obviously Priscilla Lydia Sellon's community based at Devonport, and there are strong similarities between Maude's narrative and that of Margaret Goodman, published some years before.<sup>130</sup> Both make reference to Miss Sellon's practice of discouraging friendships between Sisters, and to the apparently callous way in which sick Sisters were treated: when Maude is ill she is shamefully neglected, and a lack of sympathy towards the unwell was prevalent at Devonport.<sup>131</sup> Both note that Miss Sellon/Sister Angelica appeared to consider herself exempt from the Rule of her order; Miss Sellon living



in 'grandeur and luxury' and keeping herself too busy and too detached to realise how oppressive some elements of her Rule were, and Mother Angelica not conforming to her own orders while demanding absolute obedience from others.<sup>132</sup> They also agree about Mothers Superior over-reaching themselves in projects which frequently proved too ambitious for their available resources. However, whereas Whately is dismissive of the work done amongst the poor by the Sisters, Goodman claims that much good was done. Whately, on the other hand, portrays poor visiting as dangerous and unpleasant and also not particularly productive. Underlying her criticism is a strong element of class consciousness:

Many who read these details will be tempted to ask whether it is acting in the spirit of our Lord's precepts and practice to impose unnecessary suffering on those who are labouring in His service. Was it at His call that young girls were made to pass nightly through scenes so unfit for their age and sex?<sup>133</sup>

Whately is making the sort of criticism that Skene anticipated in Hidden Depths - that ladies should have no knowledge of crime and vice, let alone be brought into contact with it. Whereas Whately sees it as against the will of the Lord to impose what Skene calls a 'sore trial' on well-brought-up women, Skene acknowledges it as a sacrifice justified by the example of Jesus Christ. In Anglo-Catholic thinking this kind of sacrifice and suffering, as in Sewell's fiction, is ultimately beneficial not only to the person for whom the sacrifice is made, but to the one who makes it. To outsiders, such as Whately, such thinking is merely perverse.

Given that the Devonport Sisters were unlikely to have been 'young girls' (as noted elsewhere, the average age of choir profession in Anglican Sisterhoods was 33, also Goodman frequently refers to herself and fellow Sisters, particularly in her account of the Crimea, as 'elderly women' and even 'ancient dames'),<sup>134</sup> Whately's real concern here is that ladies ('of old family and good position') are exposed to not only physical dangers, but to bad moral influences ('scenes so unfit for their age and sex'). A perceived association between poverty, disease and moral degradation meant that the Sisters were deliberately exposing themselves to corruption of a very serious kind.<sup>135</sup> In Whately's eyes, Mother Angelica was behaving irresponsibly by sending her 'daughters' into places of contamination. A real mother in a genuine family situation would have protected her daughters against corrupting influence. The family of the Sisterhood is therefore a sham and



a dangerous one at that. Instead of providing protection and looking after its members it deliberately sends them into danger. Not only is a young lady in spiritual danger from 'the sensuous and corrupt system of the Church of Rome',<sup>136</sup> but the very people who ought to protect her are exposing her to moral harm.

In the mid-nineteenth century the streets of most large cities were considered places of physical and moral danger, particularly after dark. A letter to The Lancet in 1857 expressed the fears of the respectable classes:

The typical Pater-familias, living in a grand house near the park, sees his sons allured into debauchery, dares not walk with his daughters through the streets after nightfall, and is disturbed from his night-slumbers by the drunken screams and foul oaths of prostitutes reeling home with daylight. If he look from his window, he sees the pavement - his pavement - occupied with the flaunting daughters of sin, whose loud, ribald talk forces him to keep his casement closed.<sup>137</sup>

The typical Paterfamilias, if he dare not walk through the streets at night with his daughters, would certainly not want them walking there alone and unprotected for whatever reasons. Besides the fear of insult, robbery or rape - from which it was by no means certain to cynics that their innate ladyhood or conventual dress, should they choose to wear it, would protect them - there was always the possibility that these ladies would be lured away from propriety by the freedom offered by streetlife. Stallybrass and White describe Walter Benjamin walking the streets respectably with his mother but yearning for 'the flight into sabotage and anarchism'.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, ladies who had always been protected might find the shock of contact with open sexuality too overpowering to resist. By breaking down class barriers, associating with the lower classes and witnessing scenes of immorality, Sisters might be encouraged to social or sexual rebellion.

Goodman, however, did not perceive working amongst the poor as morally dangerous. She admitted that it was necessary for Sisters to have 'great strength and nerve to become acquainted with the rougher paths'<sup>139</sup> but saw lady-like qualities as an asset to reform, citing the example of 'a perfectly lady-like and gentle girl' who was very popular with the street arabs.<sup>140</sup> This is following the radically different line of thought which held that, far from being corrupted by her surroundings, a lady, simply by her innate qualities, would have a beneficial effect upon them. As Skene thought that prostitutes could only be

helped by 'earnest, religious women of the upper ranks', so W J Butler of St. Mary's, Wantage, believed that his Sisterhood's work with prostitutes, like that at Kaiserswerth and the Convent of the Good Shepherd, relied on kindness tempered with strength of will:

the discipline, so necessary to aid the work of the Chaplain in their repentance, must be carried out by those who can unite firmness with gentleness [...] a quality hardly to be found except in those of gentle birth and education.<sup>141</sup>

It was what F D Maurice, when discussing Sisterhoods, referred to as 'the power of Christian Ladyhood upon the roughest male natures [...] What could any man's voice or man's teaching have done to awake the chivalry which was latent in those little ragamuffins, and which came forth in response to female grace and gentleness.'<sup>142</sup>

According to Margaret Goodman, despite her autocratic conviction of her own social superiority, Miss Sellon extended this idea by assuming equality of standards across all classes, telling her Sisters 'to suppose that the tastes of the working classes to be much the same as those of the higher, unless we had direct evidence to the contrary.'<sup>143</sup> To some extent this attitude, which was also recommended by Skene, broke down some of the class barriers making 'female grace and gentleness' more effective. Goodman also noted that the 'labouring classes' were 'much attracted' to the Liturgy but reluctant to attend church because of the pew system. She suggested that, as the 'labouring classes' were clean, there should be no reason why the classes should not mingle 'equal before God' on a Sunday.<sup>144</sup>

An issue raised in the Saurin v, Starr trial was the condition of the nuns' clothes which were found to be old and shabby - Saurin herself had complained about the condition of her habit and stockings. Catherine Sinclair, in Beatrice had said that nuns wore each other's clothes and shared a communal comb and towel. Whately claimed that personal cleanliness was not encouraged at Westonbury/Devonport, with Sisters actively discouraged from washing and changing clothes.<sup>145</sup> Their habits were old and filthy and they had vermin, making haircropping a necessity. 'Could dirt really be pleasing to God', asks Whately as she discusses the case of a novice who hadn't washed or changed her undergarments for six weeks, and who intended to carry on in this way (she had also taken a vow of celibacy).<sup>146</sup> It might appear to those hostile to Sisterhoods that they were indeed adopting the physical habits of those they were trying to help, with the danger that this



might lead to the adoption of habits of immorality. Whately, however, linked this lack of cleanliness more to Romish practices of mortification.

The association between cleanliness and morality seems to have manifested itself in various forms in the mid-nineteenth century: parish and district visitors urged housewives living in cramped and overcrowded conditions to greater cleanliness. Even Honoria Lavington, assiduous parish visitor and ‘that sweet and heavenly angel’, in Charles Kingsley’s Yeast (1851) might not be exempt from contamination:

I think sometimes if she [Honorina] had been born and bred like her father’s tenants’ daughters, to sleep where they sleep, and hear the talk they talk, and see the things they see, what would she have been now? We mustn’t think of it.<sup>147</sup>

This perceived correlation also manifested itself in Nightingale’s campaign in the Crimea. Fighting against military indifference she succeeded in cleaning the wards at Scutari, in establishing a laundry for washing sheets and personal linen, and in supplying new shirts through her own resources. She also insisted on the soldiers being treated, if not as gentlemen, then as sensible human beings. The myth is that, in response, the soldiers in the hospital stopped swearing. Nightingale claimed that in those ‘lowest sinks of human misery’, she never heard an expression ‘which would distress a gentlewoman’.<sup>148</sup>

To maintain a continual attrition against dirt required that Nightingale’s ladies, including the Anglican and Roman Catholic Sisters, were expected to perform heavy and unpleasant domestic tasks:

“Oh, dear Miss Nightingale,” said one of her party as they were approaching Constantinople, “when we land, let there be no delays, let us get straight to nursing the poor fellows!” “The strongest will be wanted at the wash-tub,” was Miss Nightingale’s answer.<sup>149</sup>

Similarly, Maude, Miss Saurin and Miss Sellon’s Sisters were all expected to move furniture, goods, etc. themselves and to perform menial household tasks. It was claimed of the latter that ‘having all the menial work to do for themselves, it was no uncommon thing for these young ladies, brought up in all the refinements of polite life, to be carrying at half-past five o’clock in the morning a large dust barrel to the top of the Court,- a feat requiring their utmost strength’.<sup>150</sup>



By being seen to carry out the tasks of servants, the Sisters were publicly allying themselves with their social inferiors, and thereby identifying themselves with women who were regarded as sexually available by men of the Sisters' social class.<sup>151</sup> Michael Mason, in The Making of Victorian Sexuality, quotes an article in Fraser's in the 1840s: 'the days of Lovelaces and Lotharios are past ... gentlemen are less accomplished, or ladies more prudent: the seducer now reserves his skill for the humbler sphere'.<sup>152</sup> The servant classes were fair game and by aping the behaviour of servants the Sisters put themselves in further moral danger and debased themselves in the eyes of the male members of their peer group, in the opinion of the men they should marry. By getting down on their hands and knees to scrub floors they put themselves not only in a position of sexual availability, but in an animal-like and sexually inviting position.<sup>153</sup> The necessity of keeping clothes tucked closely around the body, the rolling up of sleeves to reveal the arms and the possibility of accidental exposure of the lower leg compounded the problem.<sup>154</sup> They were also guilty of not considering how their behaviour appeared to those they were trying to help - of not setting a good example to the lower classes.

Despite their free association with those they were helping, Sisters were subject to restrictions placed on contact with those outside the community. Just as Miss Saurin was told not to talk to externs, Mother Angelica's Sisters were not allowed to talk to anyone outside the Society without permission from the Superior, and to try to avoid talking to men at all. Both Mother Starr and Mother Angelica read and approved all letters before allowing them to be sent.

Whately also raises the vexed question of confession which was the subject of so much anti-Catholic propaganda. Pamphlets such as The Confessional Unmasked and Auricular Confession and Nunneries condemned the practice of women (unmarried or otherwise) being secluded with men who were, it was asserted, allowed considerable licence in the questions they asked. Such questioning under such conditions might lead to impropriety between confessor and confessed, or the nature of the questions might put salacious ideas into innocent minds where no such ideas had previously existed (as claimed by The Confessional Unmasked). The second time Maude confesses she and her confessor are 'detained a considerable time in the tower': one of Miss Saurin's accusations against Mother Kennedy of Hull was that she spent an inordinately long time in a tower with a male visitor, something which Sister Scholastica claimed was 'disedifying'. Maude was told to



make the sign of the Cross with her tongue on the Oratory floor as a penance; Sister Scholastica claimed that kissing the floor was a penance for being late for mass.

Whately quotes Mother Angelica, talking about holy obedience, as saying: 'My child, when you hear me speak, you should think it the voice of Jesus Christ.' Sir John Coleridge, counsel for the prosecution in *Saurin v Starr*, attempting to explain the relationship between nun and Superior said that: (the nuns) should behold God in their superiors, and His will in all their directions, and should be as firmly convinced that God spoke to them through their superiors as if an angel spoke to them.' The Protestant reaction to this was voiced by the Lord Chief Justice in his summing-up: '... the voice of the Superior is as the voice of God, a form more emphatic could not be used, nor, to my mind, one more shocking ...'.<sup>155</sup> Not only were Sisterhoods setting themselves up against the patriarchal family unit, but their leaders were being elevated to the status of a near-deity. The blasphemy inherent in this was obvious to those outside the Anglo-Catholic communion, and also to those inside who felt that Sisterhoods, Miss Sellon's in particular, were maverick institutions which did not consider themselves subject to episcopal rule.

Whereas the reporting of Sisterhoods in mainstream periodicals was relatively cautious, fictional representations displayed more breadth of religious opinion. Sisterhoods rarely featured in novels without a definite religious standpoint, but when they did they seem to have been treated, on the whole, with impartiality, as in Gaskell, or as a source of humour, as in Trollope. Gaskell, however, uses them to make a point about ecumenicism, and Trollope to illustrate the need for human forgiveness. Oliphant, while using Sisterhoods for humour, also saw that they had potential for channelling female energies usefully and safely, but tended to ignore or marginalize their spiritual side.

Writers of partisan Anglo-Catholic fiction tended to draw upon Ritualism as a whole to illustrate and promote their standpoint without focussing directly on Sisterhoods. Skene and Sewell both promoted the value of Anglo-Catholicism for women, with the latter putting the emphasis on discipline and duty. Skene, however, showed a woman could fulfil her destiny, in Ernestine's case the belief that she was put on earth to help her fellow creatures, without stepping outside the sanction of Church boundaries. In contrast to Ernestine's well-defined sense of vocation, which is further focussed and directed by Mr

Thorold, Rossetti's Maude relies wrongly on her own ability to decide her destiny and suffers as a consequence.

Writers of fiction who approached the subject of Anglo-Catholicism and Sisterhoods from the opposite end of the theological spectrum

Due to the religious climate of the mid-nineteenth century the opponents of Ritualism and of Sisterhoods were able to make great play with the perceived proximity of Anglo-Catholicism to Rome and the dangers of Anglican Sisterhoods being too imitative of the latter. They also criticised the 'unnaturalness' of a celibate existence apart from the family circle. More extreme critics, such as Elizabeth Whately, felt that the work Sisters were required to do was not only physically dangerous, but also potentially morally corrupting. The supporters of Sisterhoods, in true Ritualist style, tended to be reserved about promoting them. It was left to the doyenne of High Church novelists, Charlotte Yonge, to put the record straight.



- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Missing Sewell, Laneton Parsonage. A Tale for Children [1846-1848] (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1875), p.265
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Ellis Baker, The Novel and the Oxford Movement (Princeton, 1932), p.160
- <sup>3</sup> For example: Mary Frances Cusack, Five Years in a Protestant Sisterhood, And Ten Years in a Catholic Convent (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1869); Margaret Goodman, Experiences of an English Sister of Mercy (London: 1861) and Sisterhoods in the Church of England, With Notices of Some Charitable Sisterhoods in the Romish Church (London: Smith, Elder, 1863); Elizabeth Whately, ed., Maude; or, The Anglican Sister of Mercy [Augusta Dill] (London, 1869). Experiences of An English Sister of Mercy, although critical of Miss Sellon's community, acknowledges that much good was done through it.
- <sup>4</sup> Baker, p.117
- <sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Missing Sewell, Margaret Perceval (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1847)
- <sup>6</sup> Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre (London: Penguin, 1983), p.263
- <sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Missing Sewell, Laneton Parsonage: a tale for children on the practical use of the Church Catechism (London: Longmans, Green & Co., Parts I & II 1846, Part III 1848)
- <sup>8</sup> Laneton Parsonage, p.236
- <sup>9</sup> For a fuller discussion of the role of the authority figure in Sewell's fiction see: Shirley Foster, 'Elizabeth M Sewell: A Biographical and Critical Study', (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Liverpool, 1974), Chap.5
- <sup>10</sup> Foster, p.289
- <sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Missing Sewell, The Experience of Life (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1857), p.290
- <sup>12</sup> Felicia Mary Skene, Hidden Depths 2 vols (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1866)
- <sup>13</sup> Hidden Depths, Vol 1, p.83
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, Gains and Losses, Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England (London: John Murray, New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p.150
- <sup>15</sup> Hidden Depths, Vol.1, p.109
- <sup>16</sup> Hidden Depths, Vol.1, p.41
- <sup>17</sup> Hidden Depths, Vol.1, p.51
- <sup>18</sup> Hidden Depths, Vol.1, p.194
- <sup>19</sup> Charlotte Yonge also disapproved of croquet. In The Clever Woman of the Family (1865) it is the direct cause of the amoral Bessie Keith's death.
- <sup>20</sup> Emily Ayckbowm and Priscilla Lydia Sellon, for example.
- <sup>21</sup> Hidden Depths, Vol.1, p.32
- <sup>22</sup> Skene based Mr Thorold on her own mentor, Thomas Chamberlain of St Thomas-the-Martyr, Oxford, with whom she worked closely for many years.

- 23 Priscilla Sellon believed that the poor should always be assumed to have the same tastes as their betters unless there was evidence to the contrary.
- 24 Hidden Depths, Vol.2, p.83
- 25 Hidden Depths, Vol.2, p.105
- 26 See, Martha Vicinus, Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920 (London: Virago, 1985), Chap. 3, and Anne Summers, Angels and Citizens (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988).
- 27 Jan Marsh, Christina Rossetti. A Literary Biography (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p.58
- 28 Christina Rossetti, Maude, in Maude, On Sisterhoods and A Woman's Thoughts about Women ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993), p.40
- 29 Rossetti, Maude, p.40
- 30 Rossetti, Maude, p.41
- 31 Rossetti, Maude, p.58
- 32 Anthony Trollope, Barchester Towers (London: Penguin, 1982), p.20
- 33 Anthony Trollope, Framley Parsonage (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988), p.266
- 34 Anthony Trollope, The Vicar of Bullhampton (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988) p.266
- 35 Eliza L Linton, "The Girl of the Period", etc., Saturday Review, 1868-1869. A series of articles complaining of the conduct of modern women.
- 36 The Vicar of Bullhampton, pp.259-60
- 37 Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.349
- 38 Hidden Depths, Vol.1, p.109
- 39 Ruth, p.323
- 40 Ruth, p.327
- 41 Ruth, p.327
- 42 J A V Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds, The Letters of Mrs Gaskell [1966] (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), Letter 72, May 1850, p.117
- 43 Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South (London: Penguin, 1970), p.508
- 44 North and South, p.509
- 45 North and South, p.509
- 46 North and South, p.488 (I am grateful to Louise Henson for bringing this passage to my attention.)
- 47 The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, Letter 100, July 1851, p.158



- 48 Peter F Anson, The Call of the Cloister (London: SPCK, 1955), p.224
- 49 The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, Letter 100, p.158
- 50 Sisterhoods in the Church of England, p.217
- 51 The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, Letter 231, February 1855, p.335
- 52 The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, Letter 549a, March 1864, p.730
- 53 The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, Letter 173, December 1853, p.258
- 54 North and South, p.297
- 55 Elisabeth Jay, Mrs Oliphant, A Fiction to Herself (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.100
- 56 For example, in The Three Brides (1876)
- 57 Margaret Oliphant, The Perpetual Curate (London: Virago, 1987), p.10. Grange Lane was the most desirable residential area of Carlingford.
- 58 The Perpetual Curate, p.6. The Rector's objection to Sisterhoods is based on the vexed question of whether or not women's involvement in the Church was justified by Scripture.
- 59 The Perpetual Curate, p.10
- 60 The Perpetual Curate, p.10
- 61 The Perpetual Curate, p.35
- 62 The Perpetual Curate, p.41
- 63 William Dodsworth, a co-founder of the first Sisterhood at Park Village West, was eager that the Sisters should wear coloured shawls out of doors to distinguish them from Roman Catholic nuns. His request was ignored. Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church (London: SCM Press, 1971), Part 1, p.507
- 64 The Perpetual Curate, p.15
- 65 The Perpetual Curate, p.39
- 66 The Perpetual Curate, p.39
- 67 For example, by Mrs Augusta Webster in her newspaper column in the 1870s, particularly, 'The Dearth of Husbands' and 'Husband-hunting and Matchmaking', collected in, A Housewife's Opinions (London, 1879).
- 68 Margaret Oliphant, For Love And Life (London: Chapman & Hall, 1880), p.161
- 69 Gussy's uncle claims to know of a 'Sister Doctor in full practice', For Love And Life, p.161.
- 70 Susan Mumm, 'Lady Guerrillas of Philanthropy: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian England' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 1992), p.287 and p.70
- 71 For Love And Life, p.185

- 72 For Love And Life, p.185-6
- 73 For Love And Life, p.293
- 74 For Love And Life, p.81
- 75 For example, William Hogan, Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries (London: Ward & Co., 1851), p.36
- 76 Dinah Craik, Olive (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.251
- 77 Emma Jane Worboise, The House of Bondage (London: James Clark, 1873), p.458
- 78 The House of Bondage, p.400
- 79 Emma Jane Worboise, Overdale; or, The Story of a Pervert (London: James Clarke, 1869), p.246
- 80 Overdale, p.246
- 81 Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church (London: SCM Press, 1971), Part I, p.509
- 82 Overdale, p.405
- 83 Overdale, p.479
- 84 Overdale, p.497
- 85 Emma Jane Worboise, Father Fabian, The Monk of Malham Tower (London: James Clarke, 1875), p.60
- 86 Father Fabian, p.213
- 87 Father Fabian, p.68
- 88 Father Fabian, p.214
- 89 Father Fabian, p.5
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- 91 Miss Talbot was a relation of the Earl of Shrewsbury, an orphan, a ward of Chancery and the heiress of £80,000. She became a postulant in a Roman Catholic nunnery near Taunton and her stepfather called for an enquiry into who should have control of her money. See, D A Paz, Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.13
- 92 Father Fabian, p.213
- 93 Father Fabian, p.472
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- 108 Thomas Hughes, Tom Brown's Schooldays (London: Macmillan, 1857). Thomas Hughes was a lifelong friend of Charles Kingsley.
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- 116 Charles Kingsley, The Saint's Tragedy, Act IV, Scene IV
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- 119 Charles Kingsley, Yeast [1851] (London: Macmillan, 1908), p.131
- 120 Yeast, p.204
- 121 The author of Maude has been tentatively identified as a Miss Augusta Dill.
- 122 Elizabeth Whately, ed., Maude; or, The Anglican Sister of Mercy [Augusta Dill](London: 1869), Preface

- 123 Richard Whately (1787-1863), Archbishop of Dublin, 1831-1863, deeply antithetical towards Tractarianism.
- 124 Whately, Maude, Preface
- 125 Whately, Maude, p.5
- 126 Whately, Maude, p.3
- 127 Whately, Maude, p.18
- 128 The Revd James Spurrell, Miss Sellon And 'The Sisters of Mercy' (London: 1852), p.4
- 129 Whately, Maude, p.36
- 130 Margaret Goodman, Experiences of an English Sister of Mercy, (London: 1861)
- 131 Goodman, Experiences, p.12, Whately, Maude, p.170
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- 135 See, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986), Chapter 3
- 136 Whately, Maude, Appendix
- 137 Letter to The Lancet, 7 November 1857, quoted in Eric Trudgill, Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes, (London: Heinemann, 1976), p.108
- 138 Walter Benjamin, Reflections: Essays, etc., (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonavovitch, 1978), quoted in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.
- 139 Goodman, Experiences, p.54
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- 141 Quoted in, Anne Summers, Angels and Citizens (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1988)
- 142 F D Maurice, 'On Sisterhoods', The Victoria Magazine, 1863, p.296
- 143 Margaret Goodman, Sisterhoods in the Church of England (London: 1858), p.141
- 144 Goodman, Experiences, p.26
- 145 Whately, Maude, Chap.3
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- 148 Quoted in, Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians (London: Penguin, 1981) [1918], p.126



- 149 Eminent Victorians, p.125
- 150 Miss Sellon and 'The Sisters of Mercy', p.29
- 151 See, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Chap.4, for a discussion of the sexual attraction of female servants for their employers.
- 152 Michael Mason, The Making of Victorian Sexuality, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.111
- 153 See, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Chap.4
- 154 At the Middlesex Hospital in the 1880s, the Matron insisted on a four-inch train on lady probationers' uniforms so that doctors, medical students and male patients would not be able to see their ankles. Independent Women, p.105
- 155 The Times, 27 February 1869

## Chapter 5: Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901)

*“Oh! if the lawful authority - if a good clergyman would only come, how willingly would I work under him.”<sup>1</sup>*

Charlotte Yonge, born to a conscientious High Church family, a Sunday School teacher for some seventy years from the age of seven, and a pupil and friend of John Keble was probably ideally placed to be, as Barbara Dennis describes her, the ‘novelist of the Oxford Movement’.<sup>2</sup>

Yonge’s family reflected the social interests and aspirations of the High Church. They were from the land-owning and professional classes, her male relatives, if they took up a profession, generally entered the armed forces, the law or the church. Yonge’s own father, William, had been in the army and served at Waterloo. He resigned his commission on his marriage and went to live on his mother-in-law’s estate in Otterbourne, Hampshire. Finding the church in Otterbourne dilapidated beyond repair, William Yonge took it upon himself to design and finance the building of a new church (consecrated in 1838) more or less in the emerging neo-Gothic style which, under the auspices of the Ecclesiological Society, was to prove so popular with the Oxford Movement. Yonge’s family were firm supporters of overseas missions, and John Coleridge Patteson, Bishop of Melanesia, was a relative - Yonge donated her earnings from The Heir of Redclyffe (1853) to fitting out a ship for his Melanesian mission. She also became his biographer after his murder by unconvinced natives in 1871. (Other Coleridge relations included Sir John Coleridge, Solicitor General, who acted for the plaintiff in the Convent Case). William Yonge went on to establish a Sunday School in Otterbourne then, in collaboration with the vicar, day schools for the village children. He and his wife, Fanny, brought up and educated Charlotte and her brother on strict High Church principles and Charlotte’s spiritual mentor from the age of 13 was John Keble, author of The Christian Year and a formative member of the Oxford Movement, who was the vicar of the neighbouring parish of Hursley. Charlotte had close connections with W J Butler’s Sisterhood in Wantage and also with a group of ladies in Cape Town, led by a Sister from the Community of St John the Baptist, Clewer, who carried out educational and orphanage work there. When Yonge started writing fiction she did so



under the guidance of her father and then, after his death, Keble. After the latter's death she turned for spiritual and moral guidance either to clergymen or to older men of significant social standing. She never married.

The Yonges' interests and experiences were reflected in Charlotte's writing: church-building in Abbeychurch (1844) and The Daisy Chain (1856); missionary work in The Trial (1864) and The Long Vacation (1895); provision of education for the poor in The Daisy Chain; and, throughout her work, the duties incumbent upon landowners and the importance of the family. The virtues of self-discipline and duty are continually stressed in Yonge's writing. These apply to both male and female characters, but Yonge emphasises the particular importance of self-control, sublimation of self-will and reticence for girls on the verge of womanhood, as well as the obligations of familial and sisterly duty for such girls. The other prime virtue for female characters is the ability to submit to natural authority, that is, parental, clerical and masculine. Women who, notably, have trouble submitting to duty or authority in Yonge's fiction include Ethel May in The Daisy Chain, who has to subdue the desire for academic excellence and quash an incipient love affair, in order to assume domestic duties which do not come easily to her, Rachel Curtis in The Clever Woman of the Family (1865), who defies natural authority and puts her own spin on the interpretation of duty with fatal results, and Janet Brownlow in Magnum Bonum (1879), whose wilfulness and arrogant assumption of intellectual superiority also leads to disaster.

The qualities that Yonge deemed necessary to make a success of a woman's life were those highly prized by the Oxford Movement: self-discipline, adherence to duty, submission to natural authority, and a reticence in talking of religious matters. Yonge's characters reform or convert by example, they do not evangelize or preachify; thus Fernando Travis, in The Pillars of the House (1873), is brought to request baptism by observing the example of the Underwood family and by a desire to 'be like Felix and Lance'.<sup>3</sup> Often such an example takes the form of good works - poor visiting, teaching or nursing, rather than obvious piety, although all such activities are necessarily informed as much by love of God as the desire to do good, that is by the desire to serve God by serving man.

For Yonge, the model for this combination of female duty, discipline and good works seems to have been the Anglican Sisterhood where these private virtues were formalized and put to the public good. Yonge makes no place for contemplative orders in her fiction, although it is implied that prayer and self-examination play an important part in

the lives of her women and in the later fiction there are references to retreats at convents. (Ethel May says that, had she been troubled by the same religious doubts as her brother, Norman, she would have tried to overcome them by prayer, rather than intellectual argument.<sup>4</sup>) Sisterhoods are seen as opportunities for converting the work of the amateur into sophisticated professionalism systemized by the precepts of the Oxford Movement. Yonge presents Sisterhoods as exceptionally well organised and highly skilled, both in articles in The Monthly Packet, and in her novels: The Pillars of the House and The Three Brides (1876) for example. Her Sisters are moving into pioneer territory by discreetly engaging with the debate about women's work, but on the whole this is not an issue which Yonge chooses to analyse, although she was evidently aware of what was happening. Robina Underwood, for example, determines to pursue a career as a governess rather than be dependent upon her brother. Following her engagement to Bill Harewood, she continues working in order to be able to make a contribution to the expenses of setting up a household together.<sup>5</sup> In Magnum Bonum, Janet Brownlow goes to study at Zurich in order to qualify as a doctor, and Miss Ray works as a law-copier, a profession promoted by Maria Rye, one of the Langham Place group. However, the debate on women's emancipation in The Three Brides, although it puts forward convincing arguments for women's rights, ends with a plea for women to submit to, and learn from, men, at least until they can educate themselves up to deserving 'rights'.<sup>6</sup>

Yonge cloaks with religion the fact that a group of women are capable of organising themselves to serve the community usefully and thereby reduces any threat of independent female action and almost smuggles the issue of women's work into the narrative. As if to propitiate further a conservative and potentially anxious readership, her Sisterhoods are nominally, if not actually, male-led. Yonge's Sisters frequently meet with opposition which is eventually quietly overcome by the example of their excellent work, and it may be that this can be read as how Yonge sees the progress of women's work generally.

However, without self-discipline, an acknowledgement of the demands of duty, and without submission to the proper authorities, temporal and spiritual, even the best-intentioned efforts fail. The Sisterhood at St Kenselm's in Modern Broods (1901), for example, is started by a woman who has tried several Sisterhoods and thinks she can do better. Because she relies on her own judgement, thereby assuming a spiritual arrogance,



her efforts are doomed and lead to near-disaster. There has to be order, system, form and a dominant authority, acting for God and through whom God acts.

Yonge's interest in Sisterhoods, particularly in the teaching and nursing aspects of their work, and her connection with the Wantage community, obviously gave her an insight into their aims and organisation. According to Barbara Dennis, after the death of Yonge's mother in 1868, when she might reasonably regard herself as freed from familial duties, she seriously considered joining Butler's community, but instead became an Exterior, or Associate, Sister in 1869<sup>7</sup>.

Sisterhoods appear in many of Yonge's works. Her attitude to them in her fiction, given her close connections in her personal life, would seem to be equivocal, even evasive. With true Tractarian reticence she does not actively promote them, sometimes allows them to be denigrated<sup>8</sup>, sometimes makes fun of them herself<sup>9</sup>, and takes care to put forward arguments for and against<sup>10</sup>. The reason for this caginess may be a result of the disapprobation and suspicion which greeted the first Sisterhoods in the 1840s and early 1850s and which was largely dispelled by the role taken by Sisterhoods in Nightingale's nursing mission to the Crimea. The 1850s were a time of deep suspicion of anything which might be perceived to be linked to the Roman Catholic church, fuelled by the 1850 restoration in England and Wales of the Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy. A ceremonial laying of a foundation stone at one of Miss Sellon's projects in 1850 was accompanied by a stone-throwing mob, and in 1855, the funeral of Miss Scobell, of St Margaret's, East Grinstead, received similar attention. However, by the 1870s public opinion was more favourably disposed towards Sisterhoods. Not only the Crimean War but the cholera epidemic of 1866 had proved testing grounds for Sisterhoods from which they emerged with flying colours.

Yonge's fictional Sisterhood, St. Faith's, appears sporadically through her work, often as a minor reference.<sup>11</sup> It first comes into existence in The Pillars of the House, when Sister Constance comes to nurse the dying Mr Underwood and look after his wife and 13 children. However, Sister Constance is a character from an earlier novel, The Castle Builders (1854), Lady Herbert Somerville. In The Castle Builders, her husband, Lord Herbert Somerville is a saintly, dedicated, consumptive priest working wonders with the depraved population in the poorest area of a busy port, Dearport. (The similarity between 'Dearport' and Devonport, where Miss Sellon's Sisterhood was based, cannot be ignored.)

A short story in The Monthly Packet, December 1871, A Link Between 'The Castle Builders' and 'The Pillars of the House', (published while Pillars was still being serialized in the magazine) picks up the threads of The Castle Builders, and explains that Lord Herbert planned St Faith's during his final illness so that his widow could carry on his mission. This is in marked contrast to the attitudes of The Castle Builders, where Lady Constance laughs at Emmeline for 'fantasizing' about convents and Sisters of Mercy, and for visualizing a more public and independent role than would then have been acceptable to the ideals of the Oxford Movement.<sup>12</sup> The reason for the shift in perspective is the 17-year gap between the narratives, during which time Anglican Sisterhoods had become more familiar to, and accepted by, Yonge's readership.

The Monthly Packet, the magazine for Anglican girls which Yonge edited from 1851 to 1894, seems to have been inclined from about the 1860s to promote Sisterhoods more actively. The series, 'Papers on Sisterhoods' (signed RFL, and running throughout 1877), for example, examined the component parts of a representative Sisterhood, offering advice and making observations. The paper on 'The Mother Superior' lists the attributes necessary to a successful Mother Superior:

First comes a single eye to God's glory; next, clearheadedness; thirdly, cheerful good temper; fourthly, a firm, but not despotic will; fifthly, organising power; sixthly, justice or fairmindedness; seventhly, sympathy; eighthly, perseverance; ninthly, resource; lastly, personal culture and refinement, which will effectually check the bad influence of coarser natures in the Society.<sup>13</sup>

The ideal Mother Superior had to combine an unshakeable faith with excellent management skills, and be well-educated, with personal qualities which would subdue any vulgar tendencies within her community. Evidently this combination was not easily found and 'RFL' goes on to state that the Superior should be one of the 'minority of one in ten really competent members of the Society, which is the highest average usually found'.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, 'Women, as a rule, have neither the political experience nor the far-sighted forecast which would enable them to postpone an immediate and visible advantage to a distant and intangible one.'<sup>15</sup>

There are echoes here of the masculine contempt for female management shown in the Saurin v Starr trial when the prosecution contended that women were incapable of fair



government, and that personalities, petty spite and jealousy would inevitably be allowed to influence those in positions of authority. Although the author of 'The Mother Superior' does not go to the same extremes, he or she clearly doubts the leadership and management capabilities of the majority of women. This type of commentary is in opposition to what Yonge appears to be doing in her fiction, where she tends initially to disparage women's abilities, and then shows them to be perfectly competent. In The Three Brides, for example, Rosamond is initially shown to be frivolous but is revealed to be extremely able in times of crisis. Conversely, her sister-in-law, Cecil, who exudes authority, is shown to fail in this respect. In The Clever Woman of the Family Fanny Temple, who appears helpless and at the mercy of her large and unruly family, is able to summon reserves of forcefulness to deal with a difficult and unpleasant situation.<sup>16</sup>

The paper on 'The Mistress of Novices' is very revealing about the social tone of Sisterhoods. This position requires:

... consummate, personal refinement in ideas, habits and language. It cannot be too forcibly nor too frequently impressed upon the authorities of Religious Houses that all the members of their community should be, so far as is possible, "fine ladies" in the best, and indeed the only true, sense of those words. Whatever may be the faults of the highest classes in English society, at any rate, as has been pointed out in a former paper, the training they undergo from childhood teaches them two lessons at the least which are much less perfectly learnt by others, namely, self-command in restraint of personal peculiarities, and respect for the rights of their companions. These two principles lie at the root of all good breeding, and however they may be secularized in practice, are in truth two fundamental laws of Christian ethics.<sup>17</sup>

The author's use of the term 'fine ladies' is curious, given that by this time it had acquired pejorative overtones. In an 1869 article in Macmillan's, written as a follow-up to her earlier 'Two Girls of the Period' article and as a response to the Saurin v Starr case, Penelope Holland declared the modern young lady to be free of the faults of 'fine ladyism' and want of 'pluck': 'It is now considered vulgar for a girl to be afraid of compromising her dignity by doing anything which requires doing ...'<sup>18</sup> Whereas Holland uses 'fine ladyism' to refer to a distaste, innate or assumed, for performing tasks considered to be below the province of a lady, the 'Mistress of Novices' author refers to the supposed effect of good breeding and early training which will enable Sisters to cope with anything that comes their way. Thus a



genuine 'fine lady', that is, an upper-class woman who has been properly brought up, will avoid the faults of 'fine ladyism' which would be the perceived manners and attitudes of the upper classes aped, but not equalled by, those in the classes below wishing to acquire a veneer of refinement.

The Mistress of Novices should aim to refine the social tone of those in her charge as much as develop their spirituality because 'The unrefined, unladylike Sister is always the first to give in under any kind of severe strain and therefore is not dependable.'<sup>19</sup> This lack of dependability - what Penelope Holland might call a lack of 'pluck' - in the less well-bred Sister can be attributed to lack of self-control, to an inability to keep the emotions in check and refrain from self-indulgence. In the confined and rarefied atmosphere of the convent this could lead to unpleasant complications:

It is the mind, not the affections and emotions with which the Mistress of the Novices has properly to do; and she should always recollect that there is a permanent danger of hysterical excitement in Religious Houses, whereas the converse peril of cold intellectualism can scarcely be said to exist.

This dangerous hysterical excitement may have been the sort of religious excesses associated by sceptics with conventualism and from which the movement was not entirely free. Miss Ogilvie of Pusey's Park Village community fasted to such an extent during Lent and Easter 1850 that her health was destroyed and she died the following June. A Sister of Miss Sellon's Order of the Sacred Heart did not speak at all for several years, and one of the founding Sisters at Devonport, a lady of 'high standing' was 'deeply imbued with fantastic notions gathered from reading the accounts of the mediaeval ages and the practices of the saints of old.'<sup>20</sup> The plaintiff in the Convent Case, Sister Mary Scholastica (Miss Saurin), attempted or pretended to fast and claimed to have had a vision of Jesus while, she implied, being stripped and flogged by her Mother Superior.

Alternatively, 'hysterical excitement' might be a covert reference to the sort of fervent friendships found in girls' boarding schools. According to Martha Vicinus, these were known as 'raves', frequently took the form of a younger girl devoting herself to an older one, and although usually non-sexual, generated feelings which might prove disruptive if not tightly controlled.<sup>21</sup> Certainly there were parallels between boarding school and Sisterhood life, both relied, for instance, on a rigid code of discipline which constantly



monitored behaviour, and both were tightly-knit communities with members, who in other circumstances might not have chosen to associate, thrown into close proximity with each other. Also, like Sisterhoods, mid-19th-century girls' boarding schools were exclusively upper and upper-middle class. Vicinus remarks on the intensely emotional atmosphere generated by confined community living at boarding schools, but notes that social superiority was considered so inseparable from higher morality that self-control was assumed to be innate by those in authority.<sup>22</sup> Lillian Faderman also observes that most of these friendships would be intense, but non-sexual.<sup>23</sup> If such relationships existed in Sisterhoods then they would obviously been seen as inappropriate and quashed, and it would have been the duty of the Novice Mistress to weed out any incipient propensity to over-emotionalism. Miss Sellon inevitably broke up friendships between her Sisters, although this may have been drawing room politics rather than moral guardianship.<sup>24</sup>

The role of the Novice Mistress could therefore be seen as being akin to that of a housemistress in a girls' school, with the major difference being that whereas schoolgirls would be teenagers, most novices would be in their late twenties<sup>25</sup>. The emotional and physiological 'problems' associated with adolescence would therefore be replaced with those associated with unmarried women, so that burgeoning sexuality was replaced by frustrated sexuality seeking an outlet which might take the form of anti-social or bizarre behaviour. It suggested at the time that problems associated with unmarried women may have been responsible for Miss Saurin's behaviour in the court case of 1869.

So, above and beyond a vocation and a genuine desire to help others the main criterion for a novice is that she be a lady - ladylike behaviour, if not officially part of the bedrock of Christianity, being essential to the work of Sisterhoods. As Margaret Goodman observed, 'I suppose good breeding, in the best sense of the word, is one of the essentials of Christianity'.<sup>26</sup> Only ladies can cope with working long hours, in difficult circumstances, under extreme pressure. The ideal Sister should be equal to any emergency and able to sustain herself through long hours of nursing, and the ideal Sister in Yonge's fiction is Sister Constance who immediately brings order into the chaos of the Underwood household. More importantly, she does it quietly and unobtrusively, without calling attention to herself, and without allowing her presence to disrupt normal family relations. Although Alda seems to regard her as almost a servant and an inconvenience, 'so awkward to have her in the drawing room in that dress, but Sisters always thrust themselves into families', the rest of the

Underwood family are quietly grateful for her help.<sup>27</sup> Alda, however, like her brother Edgar, has been educated away from the family by wealthy and well-meaning, but unrefined and unspiritual relatives. Ultimately they both pay the penalty for this through dishonourable behaviour, Edgar by following the dictates of an undisciplined heart, and Alda, conversely, by making a calculated and mercenary marriage.

Sister Constance is an example of both the ideals of The Monthly Packet and the caution of the fiction: she is a lady, she never displays emotion beyond what is appropriate; she combines good sense with good manners, and has the ability to accept all situations with grace and calm. True to Tractarian principles, Sister Constance does not evangelize - nowhere in the narrative of Pillars does she even pray - but converts by example. Throughout Pillars her presence, although pervasive, is discreet, despite the fact that she and St Faith's play an influential part in the upbringing of the Underwood children.

If Sister Constance represents a fusion of Yonge's attitudes towards Sisters in her fiction and in her periodical writing, the difference in approach between the two genres is displayed in the treatment of a cholera epidemic in The Monthly Packet (1871), and an epidemic in The Three Brides (1876).

The epidemic in The Three Brides takes up some four chapters of the narrative and is caused by well-intentioned but misdirected women interfering with a town's water supply. Although at first this seems typical of the dire consequences which generally follow independent female action in Yonge's fiction, it then turns out that the evil lay not in the works promoted by the women, but in the (male) town councillors and landlords not following their example.<sup>28</sup> These are for the most part Dissenters or godless tradesmen so that any neglect or mismanagement could be blamed on wrong religion, on a very literal antipathy to salvation by deeds, or on the money-grasping habits of the commercial classes. In this case fault seems to lie more with men who are theologically awry than with women who take the lead - something that Yonge generally perceives as an anti-feminine and spiritually uninformed.

The same men are initially opposed to sending for St Faith's to nurse the epidemic. This opposition is based on a fear that this might be introducing Ritualism to the town, the committee of management being 'unwilling to insert the thin end of the wedge'<sup>29</sup>. Whereas the well-meaning, but misguided sanitary reforming ladies were unable to influence the councillors and committee by their arguments, the Sisters of St. Faith's impress by their



efficiency and minimal proselytizing. Once Yonge has established the Sisterhood as doing sterling work there is very little reference to them, other than the occasional assurance that they are still there and performing to standard. There is no detailed description of what the Sisters actually do nor of them in action. This lack of detail could be interpreted either as Anglo-Catholic reticence, or as a fundamental acceptance of the Sisterhood's work.

The account of the 1849 cholera epidemic in The Monthly Packet places much emphasis on first hand accounts by Sisters, doctors and clergymen, and highlights the nursing role played by Miss Sellon's Sisterhood at Devonport.<sup>30</sup> This Sisterhood had been formed the previous year, only four years after the founding of the first Sisterhood, and had been facing much opposition:

And be it remembered all along, that there is a great difference between the years 1849 and 1870. Now, the first thought, all England over, in any great calamity, is to send for a Sister. Then, there was scarcely a Sister to send for. And in Plymouth, the only place in which they were beginning to get into working order, the popular voice would certainly not have said "Come," but "Get you gone."<sup>31</sup>

The 'popular voice' here is articulating the distrust of the management committee in The Three Brides, that Sisterhoods were potentially proselytizing. Another popular objection was that ladies simply should not be exposed to the hard work and danger of infection inherent in nursing an epidemic. Paradoxically, The Monthly Packet's 'Papers on Sisterhoods' was to insist that the ability to withstand hard work and the courage to face personal danger went hand-in-hand with being a lady and with being a Sister. It was an attitude shared by Miss Sellon:

"I knew but little of Miss Sellon or the Sisters before that time, but the awful pestilence brought us much together. They were not living in my parish at the time; and when the cholera broke out with deadly violence, I had a visit from Miss Sellon one evening. "I am come," she said, "to ask if you will accept the service of myself and my Sisters in your parish." A distrustful thought crossed me. "Shall I bring these devoted ladies from another parish to such scenes and such dangers?" I must have hesitated, and said some words to this effect. "You must not look upon us as mere ladies," said Miss Sellon, "but as Sisters of Mercy - and the proper place for Sisters of Mercy is amongst the sick and dying; if you refuse our aid, we must offer it elsewhere."<sup>32</sup>

If novices were to aspire initially to be ladies, upon profession they must set their sights higher. Miss Sellon's Sisters are not 'mere ladies', they have transcended 'fine ladyism' (in whatever sense) and are now operating on a higher plane where duty is paramount, and considerations of what is due to class or gender do not exist. This is, in effect, an extension of Penelope Holland's contention that ladies should not be ashamed of doing what has to be done. Not only are Miss Sellon's Sisters unashamed of doing dangerous or menial work, they are positively requesting to be allowed to do it. This would have been seen as degrading by those opposed to Sisterhoods and spiritually elevating to those in favour of them.

As in The Three Brides, opposition is overcome and the work of the Sisterhood accepted:

The local newspapers, though less descriptive in their style than newspapers of the present day, are of some use in filling up the details of the story; and it is curious to see the quiet matter-of-fact way in which they assume the Sisters' work, referring to it as a matter of course - the very thing which a few months before they would hardly have dared to speak of without a sneer.<sup>33</sup>

The 'quiet matter-of-fact way' is exactly how Yonge treats the Sisters' work in The Three Brides. The Plymouth newspapers' acceptance of the Sisterhood mirrors the way in which Yonge expects her readers to react to them. However, whereas in The Three Brides there is an avoidance of any kind of proselytizing, The Monthly Packet article emphasises that the Sisters followed up their nursing with home visits to discharged patients, 'to keep up, as far as we may, something of the instruction and good impressions'.<sup>34</sup> In real life, the Sisters do not convert simply by example, but actively promote their beliefs.

Details of disease and nursing methods are more accurate in The Monthly Packet than in Yonge's novels as she tended to be somewhat hazy on medical matters.<sup>35</sup> She appears to have borrowed details of the hospital organisation described in The Monthly Packet article for use in The Three Brides. Much of the article is based on the first person reminiscence of a clergyman in whose parish the disease was rife. (He is very complimentary about the efforts of two of Yonge's relations, Dr Yonge, 'an eminent physician of Plymouth' and 'Mr Y\_\_\_ of P\_\_\_,' [Mr Yonge of Puslinch], 'a gentleman whose name is a synonym for all that an English country clergyman and "squire of good estate" should be'<sup>36</sup>. Mr Yonge's contributions towards fighting the epidemic were later used by



Yonge in The Three Brides where Raymond Charnock's efforts are very similar) The clergyman reports the devastating economic effect of the epidemic on his parishioners - the fishermen miss the main shoals of pilchard and thereby a large part of their annual income. Emphasis is also placed on the paucity of nursing facilities prior to the arrival of the Sisters and the economic aid offered by Miss Sellon.

Letters written by a Sister reveal the hours worked, the hardships undergone, and the dangers faced, sometimes unnecessarily:

To add to the strange horrors of the Plymouth Cholera Hospital, a poor woman was carried in who was seized with the disease on the eve of her confinement. The child was born there, and died. The mother survived the event a week, her sufferings at one time greatly aggravated by the milk which rose in her bosom. The writer of the foregoing letters, who was in attendance on her, relieved her with her own lips ... 'I did not think about it as an unusual thing,' she said, 'till I happened to look up and saw Dr. \_\_\_\_ with his eyes fixed on me and the tears standing in them. "Promise me," he said, "not to do that again." I could not promise, but said I would try the plan he proposed for her relief first.<sup>37</sup>

This is not a detail which would find its way into Yonge's fiction on several counts. Firstly, while it might illustrate noble self-sacrifice to an idealistic High Church schoolgirl, it is patently unsuitable for the wider readership of the novels. Although Yonge could be fairly sure of the class and religious orientation of Monthly Packet readers, she would have been aware that her novels, being regarded generally as 'safe', would have been read by families who did not necessarily share her views. Secondly, it verges on the over-zealous, even fanatical, which is something Yonge avoids in her presentation of Sisterhoods in her novels.

For an Anglo-Catholic reader the incident might recall the works of some of the saints - a perverted or reversed St Bernard might be the obvious image. However, more appropriate would be St Catherine of Genoa who, hearing a dying plague victim struggling to pronounce the name of Jesus, kissed her mouth and caught the plague, but not fatally. St Catherine is credited with the organisation of nursing in the plague of 1493 and therefore might have been seen as a rôle model for a nursing Sister.<sup>38</sup> The similarities are striking and raise the question of whether some Sisters were driven, not so much by wanting to serve their fellow creatures for Jesus' sake, but by a self-absorbed desire to emulate saints and martyrs. The instances of bizarre behaviour reported in accounts of the founding



communities would seem to have been informed by the activities of some of the more psychopathic heroes and heroines of the Church. Yonge herself was not exempt from this: the pious five or six year-old Owen Sandbrook shows a disturbing fascination with St. Cyr (St. Quiricus).<sup>39</sup> Margaret Goodman considered that the Sister at Devonport who was 'deeply imbued with fantastic notions' about saints was influential on the thinking of that Sisterhood, and responsible for promoting a faux-medievalism which played a formative part of convent life.<sup>40</sup> Certainly Butler's Lives of the Saints would have been readily available and probably part of the limited reading allowed at communities like Devonport.

Religious considerations aside, the incident demonstrates an extraordinary transcendence of social and physical boundaries. The Sisterhood movement was primarily upper and upper-middle class and those they were nursing predominately from working class and slum areas. In a society where the bourgeoisie avoided unnecessary contact with the lower classes, other than as functionaries to serve their needs, the Sisters' patients were being cared for by ladies. The duties of servants included the physical care of their employers and dealing with their waste products; the main symptoms of cholera are severe diarrhoea (hence the notorious 'cholera cot') and vomiting. By nursing the victims, by keeping them clean and nourished and clearing away their excrement, the Sisters achieved a startling role reversal.

The danger of catching cholera from the victims was a very real one. In the case of the over-zealous Sister, although ingesting the breast milk would not have been particularly harmful (the antibodies present in colostrum may even have provided some protection against infection), cholera is a waterborne infection and oral contact with the body of the afflicted woman, who would probably been covered with traces of vomit and excrement, presented an ideal opportunity for the transfer of bacteria.<sup>41</sup> However, as Stallybrass and White have noted, the association between disease and moral degradation meant that the danger to the Sisters would not have been perceived as merely physical.<sup>42</sup> By not avoiding contact, but by actively seeking it, by coming into intimate contact not just with the lower class, but with their excrement, the Sisters increased the danger of moral contamination of the most degrading kind. That they emerged relatively unscathed, physically and morally (only one fatality is recorded amongst the Sisterhood) would have been regarded by Anglo-Catholics as a tribute not only to their ladyhood and moral rectitude but to the spirituality which had sustained them during a time of severe trial.



The epidemic in The Three Brides is never definitely named. At the outbreak, Julius Charnock asks if it is typhus<sup>43</sup>, but as the outbreak is traced to Pettit's well it is obviously a waterborne infection which would suggest cholera, or possibly typhoid. Yonge refers to it as 'the fever': 'The Water Lane Fever. People called it so, as blinking its real name ...'<sup>44</sup> She offers the reader the choice of naming it and acknowledging its full implications, or of glossing it over and choosing to ignore distasteful details. The role of the Sisters in nursing the epidemic could therefore be understood on two levels - superficially, as wiping fevered brows and praying, or as coming into intimate contact with the dregs of humanity, in every sense of the phrase - and their efforts appreciated accordingly.

The Sisters' penetration of the innermost recesses of lower class life, and their emergence uninfected has a parallel in The Three Brides in the disappearance of Julius and Rosamond's baby. The child's nursemaid, who has undesirable relations, secretly takes the baby to the races. These races, which are an annual event and a precursor to the epidemic in the narrative, have been condemned as excuses for all sorts of immorality (gambling, drunkenness and prostitution) by Raymond Charnock, and although there is a tacitly accepted class separation, intermingling does happen. The baby not only spends all day at the races, but is taken on the way home to a notorious public house, from which she is rescued by her mother, an aristocrat of High Church principles. Miraculously, she suffers no harm - being preconscious and therefore unaffected by sin she emerges unscathed. Similarly, the Sisters are not affected by their nursing experiences, and are enabled by their class and inherent purity to pass unharmed through the epidemic.

Although the Monthly Packet article is about the 1849 cholera epidemic, it was written retrospectively in 1871. The work done in 1849 was to some extent negated by 'papal aggression' in the 1850s, but the steady growth and acceptance of Sisterhoods seems to have meant that by the 1870s, Yonge felt confident in including them in her fiction. Yonge had also apparently become involved with Canon Butler's community in 1865, which would further explain her change of attitude as she became familiar with his Sisterhood's work.<sup>45</sup>

The initial portrayal of Sisterhoods in the novels is muted, as if Yonge was reluctant to introduce controversy. Although the proposed founding of a Sisterhood is central to The Heir of Redclyffe (1853) there is very little detail about how this is to be established, other than that money will be needed. Yonge prefers to concentrate on the good works of the

Wellwood sisters which started from small beginnings, but now need to be formalized and extended under the organisation of a Sisterhood. Opposition to the scheme ('There is certainly a "tyrannous hate" in the world for unusual goodness'.<sup>46</sup>) is led by the parish ladies' committee who are annoyed that the Wellwoods take direction from the local clergyman, rather than from themselves. In Yonge's terms, of course, this is absolutely the right authority to which to submit, and the ladies' committee is part of a succession of aberrant women who wrongly assume superiority, which includes the ladies' sanitary efforts in The Three Brides, the ladies' committee's opposition to the school at Cocks Moor in The Daisy Chain, and all of Rachel Curtis's projects before her reformation (The Clever Woman of the Family).

The importance of women working under the right authority is highlighted in Pillars where Yonge contrasts the work of St Faith's with that of the Miss Hepburns, who describe themselves as 'single women, who have long ago broken with the world', and who are referred to by Yonge as 'the sisterhood'.<sup>47</sup> Their Evangelicalism leads them to reject salvation by good works, and to believe that it is only attainable by faith. They work for the poor, but as a matter of social obligation ('They're as poor as Job, and their pride is all they have, so they make the most of it.'<sup>48</sup>) and this work is accompanied by tracts and independently organised bible readings.

The contrast between this sisterhood *manqué* and the real Sisterhood at St. Faith's is obvious. The Sisters of St. Faith's have humility and see God in all their works and duties. The Hepburns do their duty amongst the poor, but their duty is not informed by piety. They believe in justification through faith, rather than by deeds:

Till to Redemption's work you cling  
By a simple faith  
"Doing" is a deadly thing,  
"Doing" ends in death.<sup>49</sup>

The Hepburns are well-meaning, but their belief system is at fault, and their distorted sisterhood throws that of St. Faith's into sharp relief. They also act without the sanction of male authority, and even offer to explain Felix's duty to him. Despite their Evangelical views they ultimately respect the authority of the Established church, having a horror of Dissent. They are deeply suspicious of St. Faith's, so that Felix has to give an excuse for



Geraldine's presence there.<sup>50</sup> The irony here is of course that their work emulates that of the Sisterhood, in a small and localized way, although without the proper sanction.

Despite Yonge's close involvement with a Sisterhood her personal experiences do not seem to be reflected in her fiction. She establishes that Lord Herbert was the originator behind St Faith's, thereby making it acceptably male-led, albeit posthumously. (Later, concurrent with a fashion for retreats, and a growing emphasis on the contemplative aspect of the religious life, St Faith's acquires a spiritual director in Dr Easterby who first appears in 1876 in The Three Brides.) How the Rule of the order was formulated, and the exact circumstances of its founding are outside any narrative. St Faith's is a *fait accompli*, thereby avoiding the potential for controversy which might accompany the details of its founding and organisation. Vows of obedience, 4 a.m. services and nuns' habits were still, in the 1870s, redolent of Roman Catholicism for a great many people, and Yonge neatly manages to present St Faith's positive, i.e. socially active, side without invoking disturbing images. In fact, St. Faith's itself, that is, the buildings and the life of the community within it, are never fully described. The Sisters are always out in the world, nursing, teaching or caring: showing the most acceptable face of Anglican conventualism. Yonge very rarely refers to it as a convent - it is almost always St Faith's, or the Sisterhood - thus maintaining the distinction between Anglican and Roman orders.

Although various Underwood children (Pillars) are packed off to St Faith's at times of family crisis Yonge does not include their experiences in the narrative, although Felix describes the Sisters as 'a set of jolly old girls', implying that there is no atmosphere of either spiritual superiority or melancholy seclusion.<sup>51</sup> It is due to the peace that Geraldine finds there that she is enabled to make the decision to have her foot amputated, and to have the operation performed at the Sisterhood, where she feels secure. Geraldine does relate some of her experiences there but very much from a child's point of view - there is a 'lovely oratory' with daily services, a pleasant visitors' room, she helps make wreaths for the 'great May holidays', and the Sisters talk to her 'as a woman, not a baby'.<sup>52</sup> Yonge manages to imply a place of holiness and happiness without going into details which might disturb her readers. Her own perception of St Mary's, Wantage, was that the atmosphere was like 'a brisk, frosty morning, because of the dislike there for any unreal sentiment'.<sup>53</sup>

As if reflecting the caution with which Yonge treats St Faith's, the second Sister who appears in several novels, Sister Angela, is never a professed Sister. A rebellious character



in Pillars, like Sir Guy Morville who craved 'something famously horrid'<sup>54</sup> to help him towards self-discipline, Angela sees St. Faith's as her only refuge from herself, 'The wild spirit craved for discipline'.<sup>55</sup> If not the black sheep of the Underwood family, Angela is not exactly a credit to it. She is a flirt, and given to terrible jealousy over her sisters' affairs. She is also indirectly responsible for the boating accident which causes Theodore's death and leads eventually to Felix's: by rejecting Theodore's religious anthem and singing a saucy song she attracts a party of young men whose boat collides with the Underwood's when her rowing proves inadequate. Her intense emotion afterwards is fired as much by the discovery that an intended conquest intends to marry her sister as remorse for what she has done. As a reaction she rejects the High Church ethos of her family and temporarily takes up the Evangelicalism of the Miss Hepburns.

Although, at the end of Pillars, Angela is at St Faith's and about to become a postulant, her later career is chequered. The Long Vacation (1895) starts with a *resumé* of various family histories to date, including hers. Angela, who originally craved discipline, left St Faith's because of the enforcing of stricter rules. After some *risqué* adventures on the Continent, involving aristocrats of dubious character, she trains as a nurse at a London hospital. Leaving there after a quarrel with her superiors, she returns to St Faith's and Mother, formerly Sister, Constance takes her to form a foundation on the model of St. Faith's in one of the new cities of Australia. Other than this, Angela does not appear in The Long Vacation.

Angela's story concludes in Modern Broods, some 28 years after her first appearance. Still unprofessed, she has been working wonders with Aborigines in the Australian outback, despite being 'funny' and 'flighty'. Angela herself says that she has 'a demon of waywardness' and acknowledges the calming influence of Dearport. She dies saving her favourite brother, Bernard, in a shipwreck, singing 'Lead Kindly Light' and with a vision of brother Felix (or possibly Jesus, or both) coming towards her over the waves.

Angela's continually deferred profession is perhaps symbolic of a deeprooted unworthiness, or even possibly Yonge's personal conflicts about the religious life. Angela certainly falls short of the standards set in the 'Papers on Sisterhoods', continually allowing herself to be ruled by her emotions and resisting discipline, while at the same time acknowledging a very real need for it.



Angela, notoriously, has trouble sublimating her sexuality. Even when working for the daughter house in Australia she attracts, and is attracted to, a widower who wishes to marry her, and whose proposal she seriously considers. As an adolescent, her preferences swing widely between a Sisterhood and marriage: 'When I'm good I do long for a Sisterhood; and when I'm bad I want to get some great rich duke to marry me ...'<sup>56</sup> If 'good' and 'bad' refer to Angela's sexual identity, rather than to her spiritual state, then it would seem obvious that the obstacle to her profession is the vow of chastity. Although Sisterhoods took annual, rather than perpetual vows, many regarded them as lifetime commitments, and not something to be renounced easily.

Yonge's general attitude to the vow of chastity seems ambiguous in the novels. Celibate priests, such as Robert Fulmort and Clement Underwood, are plentiful and their celibacy is seen as dedication to the church. Whereas Robert Fulmort (Hopes and Fears) hopelessly pursues Lucilla Sandbrook and attains celibacy through a process of rejection, Clement Underwood (Pillars) never shows any sign of being attracted to the opposite sex. Indeed, his closest relationship is with his fellow curate in Whittingtonia, Fred Somers. Yonge's pattern Sister, Sister Constance, is a widow, Sister Hedwige from the Kaiserswerth Deaconesses has a 'past',<sup>57</sup> and most of the women in her fiction who elect for celibacy, whether it be spinsterhood or Sisterhood, have had some sort of romantic experience.<sup>58</sup> That these experiences are not followed up is often attributed to the call of a higher duty, but they also serve to illustrate that these women are by no means sexually 'abnormal'.

Of the vows that Sisters took on profession, the vow of chastity was the most contentious and attracted the most criticism from outsiders. For women to reject marriage and motherhood formally and of their own free will was seen as bizarre and perverted, and led to some of the most vituperative anti-convent propaganda.<sup>59</sup> Yonge seems to be trying to prove that her Sisters are 'normal' and that they do not force their own choices on other women. Alternatively, the fact that some women choose celibacy rather than marriage, that they look for the opportunity to serve in a wider sphere than that of the family, is seen as ennobling as long as the family is happy for them to do so.

In some ways, Yonge treats marriage and profession as analogous: both require sacrifice and submission and the acceptance of a change in status. Wilmet Underwood mirrors the actions of Sister Constance by immediately setting off for Egypt to nurse her badly wounded fiancé on receiving the news of his accident - he has been badly scalded by



an exploding train engine boiler. In the same way that Sister Constance leaves the family of the convent, Wilmet hands over her household responsibilities and the care of her siblings to the next eldest sister. However, whereas Sister Constance, as a widow and a Sister, can travel alone, Wilmet, young and unmarried, has to be chaperoned by her fiancé's father, Mr Harewood. Once in Egypt, Wilmet forms an alliance with Sister Hedwige, and lives more or less apart from the rest of the community in Rameses, spending her whole time nursing her fiancé, John. When Mr Harewood has to return to England, Wilmet proposes, against her innate propriety, that she should marry John in order to be able to stay alone and nurse him. Although she realises this is an 'extraordinary proceeding'<sup>60</sup>, she is determined to breach the normal codes of conduct. Such subversive behaviour is acceptable in Yonge's fiction when sanctioned by duty and undertaken in a spirit of purity. Similarly, a woman entering a Sisterhood would be aware that she was transgressing accepted female patterns of behaviour. Dr Chenu considers that Wilmet's '... hand and head, her nerve and gentleness, equalled those of the most skilful *soeur* with whom he had ever been thrown.'<sup>61</sup> Sister Hedwige thinks she is a '... noble, self-possessed, helpful woman, who was equal to any of the Fliedner disciples in resource and firmness.'<sup>62</sup> Wilmet, then, as an Anglican amateur nurse, gains approbation from both Lutheran religious and Roman Catholic doctor. Throughout the Egyptian part of the narrative Wilmet is continually portrayed quasi-religiously; when she is preparing for the wedding ceremony it is in terms of undertaking a sacred trust, '... she could only recollect that she was qualifying herself for the entire charge of John'.<sup>63</sup> The wedding itself bears similarities to the ceremony of profession, partly because the groom is desexed and it is tacitly acknowledged that the union must, initially, be a spiritual one, and partly because of the atmosphere of impending death. By marrying with the knowledge that she will almost certainly be a widow very soon, Wilmet is allying herself with certain closed orders where entry into the convent was seen as departing the living world. The consummation of the marriage is represented by the Holy Communion service which immediately follows it; similarly, the newly professed Sister would communicate after the ceremony which made her a Bride of Christ. Gradually, however, John Harewood recovers and Wilmet, from being in the dominant position of nurse, has to learn to submit herself to his natural authority as her husband - a process she initially resists, finding it difficult to abdicate from her position of power, but is eventually taught by John to accept..



The sympathetic presentation of Dr Chenu in Pillars is representative of Yonge's attitude to Roman Catholicism in her later fiction. The perceived similarities between some aspects of Roman Catholicism and Anglo-Catholicism, particularly in relation to conventualism, obviously made her wary about its presentation in her fiction. Generally there is little mention of it in her fiction, and when it does appear it is treated with caution. In her 1854 novel Heartsease she warns against some of the specific dangers of the Roman Catholic church, and also implies that adherence to High Church principles without proper guidance can bring one dangerously close to assuming that the latter is merely a step on the way to the former. Lady Elizabeth Brandon and her daughter Emma live a quiet and exemplary life - Lady Brandon looks after orphan girls in her own home.<sup>64</sup> Emma is an heiress and on coming of age intends restoring a ruined abbey on her land as an orphanage and almshouses. (The rebuilding and rededication of a ruined priory is central to William Sewell's Hawkstone, 1845). Emma comes under the influence of a strong-minded friend, Theresa Marstone, who regards herself above seeking instruction and who has developed extreme and individual ideas about the Church, including the notion of establishing a formal religious community at the priory. The evil of Theresa's influence is illustrated by Emma's attempt to persuade her friend (also strong-minded) Theodora Martindale to visit a Roman Catholic convent without their mothers' knowledge or consent. Theodora is horrified at the idea and Emma protests that the proposed visit is to be undertaken purely in a spirit of enquiry 'I thought you understood the true Catholic spirit and were interested in these things'. She then receives a lecture from Theodora on the wickedness of subterfuge 'The Catholic spirit is anything but such treatment of a mother.'<sup>65</sup> Theodora goes on to accuse Emma of making 'a Pope' of Theresa and of treating her mother as a 'nonentity'. Theresa later defects to Rome (her justification for doing this is similar to that of Newman) and Emma returns chastened to her mother's guidance and to the task of rebuilding the priory for her original purpose.<sup>66</sup>

In a novel published so soon after 'papal aggression' and in a period when Roman Catholicism was regarded with particular suspicion Yonge's strictures about the dangers of feeling too close an attraction to Rome and of not submitting the most appropriate advice are not surprising. She was aware of the schism that a secession to Rome could cause within a family - one of her Coleridge cousins had 'gone over' in 1852, and the eldest son of a neighbour had joined the Roman Catholic church in 1850. "The separation was worse



than death”, Yonge wrote.<sup>67</sup> Much later in her life, in 1901, she wrote an article for The Churchwoman (published posthumously in book form), ‘Reasons Why I am a Catholic and not a Roman Catholic’. Her purpose, outlined in the Preface, was to show ‘what the Church of England really holds’ with the aim of preventing secession to Rome.<sup>68</sup> The first three chapters are concerned with demonstrating the true Catholicity of the Church of England and its place in the Apostolic Succession through recourse to early Church history. Yonge then goes on to dismiss various tenets of the Roman church. She does not, for example, hold with the Immaculate Conception (‘this cannot be believed by a candid Catholic mind’<sup>69</sup>), nor the Infallibility of the Pope. In chapters five and six she traces the developments of Mariolatry and the cultus of saints, showing that they were late developments within the Church and therefore not sanctioned by the Early Fathers. Jesus himself, Yonge says ‘forbade direct prayer to any save himself’.<sup>70</sup> These, together with notions of purgatory, indulgences and relics show that the Roman church ‘has wandered from the Catholicity of the first ages of Councils’.<sup>71</sup> Confession, however, is approved of as long as it is done in the right spirit - Yonge is contemptuous of the *pension* girls in Villette who invent sins to confess.

Portrayal of Roman Catholicism in The Monthly Packet tended to encompass a wide range of its aspects and, by the 1870s demonstrated a surprising level of sympathy, perhaps because the focus tended to be on the aspects which were most acceptable to Anglo-Catholics. The serial ‘The Angel of Brittany’, which ran for three months from February 1871, is a biography of Maria de la Fruglaye, whose life might be seen as an inspiration to an aspiring Anglican postulant. Maria was born into a aristocratic Roman Catholic family shortly after the French Revolution. Her mother, who had narrowly escaped the Terror, died when she was a week old and Maria was brought up by her strict grandmother and her mother’s old servant. From the age of twelve she taught the local peasant children the Catechism. As she grew older she devoted herself to the care of her widowed father, to her domestic duties, and to her responsibilities towards the peasantry on their estate. Her many achievements included organising the nursing of a cholera epidemic, the establishment of schools under the supervision of the Christian Brothers, and the founding of the Convent of St Francis, which was both a hospital and an educational establishment. All this she performed apparently in an atmosphere of utmost serenity. Her biographer is amazed at the tenor of her life:



And truly it was marvellous how Maria led so busy yet so calm a life; how she accomplished so many of her own aims, whilst she was, apparently, at the beck and call of everyone around her. The explanation may be found in her extreme spirituality, which looked on the smallest action as done for God.<sup>72</sup>

The idea of elevating even the humblest task by performing it as a gift to God was one which was very familiar to Anglo-Catholics.

From an early age Maria had known she had a vocation, but delayed entering a convent, firstly until after the death of her father, and then until her health, which had suffered during his long illness, had recovered sufficiently to allow her to be useful in the convent. After her admittance to the Convent *des Oiseaux* she undertook teaching work and wrote spiritually edifying letters to her family and friends. Her early death was regarded as a tragedy, both by her fellow nuns, and by her family, friends and dependants in Brittany. Her biographer closes the account of her life on a note of ecumenicalism:

And as, almost unwillingly, we close these pages from the life of her whom men called the Angel of Brittany, we are thankful to acknowledge that she did not belong to our own branch of the Church. In these days, so full of theology, so empty of religion, we need to be taught again and again the great lesson that “the Saints are of no Church”. Obedience, humility, and love, belong to no one class or order of humanity; they are neither Protestant nor Romanist, but truly Catholic; and when we listen to the holy teaching of Maria de la Fruglaye, whether in the position of a noble young Frenchwoman, or in that of a humble *religieuse*, she speaks to us as fellow-citizens of the great community of Christ.<sup>73</sup>

Maria de la Fruglaye’s behaviour has of course been exemplary in Anglo-Catholic terms. She devoted her early adulthood to her home and her family, caring for her father until his death. She undertook works of charity for the poor in the country surrounding her home, and used her own money to supply their wants. While carrying all this out willingly and cheerfully, she was constantly sublimating her own desire to enter a convent. There is a strong class element in her story - while her mother and aunt would have been killed in the Terror but for the bravery of a servant, Maria becomes ‘as a mother’ in her care of her dependants, and there is a strong sense of *noblesse oblige* being repaid by faithful service. Her constant consideration for others led her to yet again restrain her own desires by waiting



until her health was mending before entering a convent so that she would not become an encumbrance to the community. (The Monthly Packet's Paper on Sisterhoods concerning the choosing of postulants emphasised the importance of good health in community members.)

The notion of serving others was heavily promoted in The Monthly Packet. 'A Conversation on "Coming Out"', a homily in the form of a short story against the vanities and temptations of the world for girls about to be launched on Society, makes several points about this. Miss Hamilton, a governess, recommends poor-visiting, not only as a positive duty, but 'for the sake of entering into their [the poor's] feelings, of seeing how much there is to bear in the world and how well it is borne, for the sake of learning to be thankful and learning to sympathize.'<sup>74</sup> Life after 'coming out' should not be the ceaseless round of pleasure and enjoyment anticipated by Miss Hamilton's pupils: 'Wherever God has placed us, we may be sure we are not there for the sole purpose of enjoying ourselves. Make it a fixed rule that your own improvement and the good of others are your first duties.'<sup>75</sup> The life of the devout Roman Catholic Maria de la Fruglaye would no doubt have been regarded by Miss Hamilton as an example to her charges.

The ideal of service, and the example that might be set by Roman Catholics, recurs in reports on the Franco-Prussian war in The Monthly Packet. 'Sédan and its Hospitals' is a first-hand account by a lady who travelled to Sédan from Ostend with her brother in order to undertake nursing work shortly after the Battle of Sédan (at the time considered the worst in terms of casualties in European history).<sup>76</sup> Not only does she comment on the work done there by Sisters from All Saints, Margaret Street, and a contingent of lady volunteers with the Anglo-American ambulance (ambulance is used in its original sense as a military or field hospital), but also on the contribution by Roman Sisters of Mercy. The following month's issue saw an article on 'The Red Cross at Tours' which described the organisation of ambulances and the preparations made to receive casualties (French and Prussian) from the advancing fighting.<sup>77</sup> Most of the nursing was done by Roman Catholic orders who made over their convents for the reception of the wounded. The anonymous author of the article is full of praise for their dedication and for their organisational skills.

A further article in March 1871 described the work of a grandmother stranded in Paris during the siege, 'Ambulance Life in Paris'.<sup>78</sup> She joined the Anglo-American ambulance, or field hospital, which although principally made up of Americans, included



many other nationalities and differing religious persuasions - English, French, German, Italian and Russians. Discovering that watching her sew soothes fractious patients, she takes up sewing on a Sunday for the first time in her life despite ‘an instant’s repugnance’:

When the doctor came in I said, “You see me sewing on a Sunday for the first time in my life, but it has such a quieting influence on this one, (indicating Edmond,) that my duty is clear.”<sup>79</sup>

Just as Wilmet sacrifices her natural propriety in order to do what she considers best for John Harewood, this lady is prepared to abandon the belief of a lifetime for the benefit of others. This sacrifice is rewarded when, at her request, the wounded soldiers give up the use of *mots militaires* in her presence, as Nightingale’s patients reportedly refrained from blaspheming in front of her.

The ideals aspired to by Anglo-Catholic women were shown by Yonge to be obtainable not only in heroic situations such as a war or epidemic, but in everyday life. She showed the inter-actions of large families, such as the Mays and the Underwoods, to be microcosms of the ways in which the larger world worked, and emphasised the importance of small acts of kindness or sacrifice. Her popularity as a novelist lay partly in her ability to ‘make goodness attractive’, and also in showing that it was possible to fail, to succumb to temptation, but ultimately, with repentance and the right guidance, to be accepted again as a ‘good’ person. The career of Angela Underwood showed how it was possible to go astray more than once and still be received back into the Church, and Ethel May’s struggle with her academic vanity, and the difficulty with which she undertakes her domestic duties, are rewarded by the realisation that she has become the loved and trusted mainstay of her family. Yonge uses these difficulties to create interesting tensions within her narratives, perhaps most so in The Clever Woman of the Family where although she seems to sympathise with Rachel in seeking self-improvement and wanting to do something to help those less fortunate than herself, she ridicules her spiritually dangerous assumption of intellectual superiority and pretensions to leadership.

Yonge reflected the interests of Anglo-Catholics - church-building, missionary work, duty to the poor - and focused them on the young women who were her target audience. She stuck to the warning she was given by Keble early on in her career and, while

promoting her beliefs, avoided the sort of overt preaching in her fiction which made religious books unpalatable to a wider audience.

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte M Yonge, The Daisy Chain, [1856](London: Virago, 1988), p.339

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Dennis, Charlotte Yonge (1823-1901) Novelist of the Oxford Movement (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992)

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte M Yonge, The Pillars of the House 2 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), Vol.1, p.152

<sup>4</sup> The Daisy Chain, p.518

<sup>5</sup> Pillars, Vol.2, p.391

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte M Yonge, The Three Brides (London: Macmillan, 1876), Chap.10

<sup>7</sup> Dennis, p.109

<sup>8</sup> For example, by Dr May in The Trial (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), p.11, because they 'might put ideas into girls' heads'. By the next page Sisterhoods have his seal of approval.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte M Yonge, Modern Broods (London: Macmillan, 1900)

<sup>10</sup> The Pillars of the House

<sup>11</sup> For example, in, Charlotte M Yonge, The Clever Woman of the Family, [1865] (London: Virago, 1985), p.431.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte M Yonge, The Castle Builders (London: Mozley & Smith, 1875), p.272

<sup>13</sup> 'RFL', 'The Mother Superior', The Monthly Packet 24, (July-December 1877), p.80

<sup>14</sup> 'The Mother Superior, p.80

<sup>15</sup> 'The Mother Superior', p.80

<sup>16</sup> The Clever Woman, p.217



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## Chapter 6: Henry Kingsley (1830-1876)

*In Christ there is no East or West  
In Him no South or North,  
But one great fellowship of love  
Throughout the whole wide earth'<sup>1</sup>*

If Charlotte Yonge gave whole-hearted, if appropriately reserved support to Anglican Sisterhoods, then Henry Kingsley exhibited an enthusiasm for both Sisterhoods and Roman Catholic Sisters of Mercy which was not only unusual in fiction, but also antithetical to the well-known beliefs of his brother, Charles. He was a practising member of the Church of England all of his life, but developed a thoughtful ecumenicism which embraced all Christian doctrines.

Henry Kingsley seems to be remembered, if he is remembered at all, as the misfit of a talented and successful family. He was the younger brother of Charles Kingsley and of George, a doctor who specialized in attending members of the aristocracy on their travels and who published his experiences afterwards. A sister, Charlotte, co-authored a volume of children's stories and a novel; George's daughter, Mary Kingsley was a renowned traveller and writer; Charles' daughter Rose achieved some celebrity as a gardener and author of gardening books, while the novelist 'Lucas Malet' was Charles' younger daughter Mary. Henry followed the same pattern of travel and writing: he had gone to the Australian goldfields in an unsuccessful attempt to make his fortune, he participated in public controversy, and if he is now overshadowed by his brother as a novelist, at one point during his lifetime his work was considered superior by some. He led the kind of roaming, bucaneeing life that Charles was to write about in Westward Ho! (1855) and Hereward the Wake (1865), but drew upon it surprisingly sparingly in his own fiction. Despite his relative obscurity and the lack of solid information about much of his life he has been the subject of three biographies.<sup>2</sup> He is perhaps better regarded in Australia as one of the first 'Australian' novelists, that is, one of the first to use Australian settings for fiction in his novels The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn (1859) and The Hillyars and the Burtons (1865) and several short stories. He had apparently been the guest of Rolf Boldrewood (T A Browne)



during his time in Australia and there are distinct similarities between incidents in Geoffrey Hamlyn and Boldrewood's Robbery Under Arms (1888).

Henry Kingsley's narrative style might best be described as discursive. He was very prone to authorial comment, not always directly connected with the subject matter in hand, and was always eager to digress about personal enthusiasms - dogs, gardening, horses, or rowing, for example. In consequence, his earlier novels have a buoyancy and zest which overcome deficiencies in characterization and plot. He also had a talent for depicting landscape and scenes of action and daring. Unfortunately, he developed a preference for cluttered and complicated plots, starting with a secret marriage and babies switched at birth in Ravenshoe (1862) and reaching a nadir with the almost incomprehensible Number Seventeen (1875). He became increasingly unable or unwilling to create convincingly motivated villains - most of them turn out to be the victims of circumstance or undergo last minute, or even mid-career conversions, making it difficult to sustain any kind of dramatic tension within narratives often reliant on double-dealing and treachery.

Henry also overstretched his ability to create convincing dialogue, so that in Silcote of Silcotes (1867) a lady's maid has the vocabulary of an Oxford don and, in Stretton (1869) an Indian prince alternately uses the speech patterns of a dilettante and a Devon fisherman. His sense of humour, which in his early work was quirky and engaging, tended later to become absurdist to the point of nonsensical, as in Valentin (1872) for example, when he attempts a mock-analysis of Humpty Dumpty's song, 'In winter when the fields are white' from Through the Looking Glass (1871), as a covert statement of the British Government's stance on the Franco-Prussian war:

The English do not understand politics at all; and it would be much better if M. Louis Carroll would attend to his duties as a professor, instead of irritating a very high-spirited nation as the French by political poems like that of "Humpty Dumpty". The *fish* are the English, that is patent. Look at the shameless political intention of this passage, when the French ask the English to stop supplying arms to the Germans:

"The little fish's answer was,  
We cannot do it, sir, because -" <sup>3</sup>

Much of Henry's work, like that of his brother Charles, belongs to the muscular Christian school of fiction, but whereas Charles was muscular as an integral part of his



particular brand of Protestantism, Henry's muscularity was infused with a more global Christian ethos enabling him to avoid the extremes of fanaticism and gentlemanly psychopathy portrayed by his brother. Thus, while Henry revelled in feats of valour and physicality for their own sake - the rowing match in Stretton or cattle branding in Geoffrey Hamlyn - Charles, who on occasion was bloodthirsty to the point of sadism, was inclined to violence with a moral, i.e. usually Protestant, purpose.<sup>4</sup> Charles felt able to justify and even glorify violence committed for this end, both in fiction - the eviction of the Spanish from Ireland and subsequent massacre of prisoners in Westward Ho! - and in real life, where he was a supporter both of Governor Eyre in the controversy following the bloody suppression of the Jamaica mutiny, and of 'Rajah' Brooke in his persecution of the natives of Sarawak. Henry, too, supported Eyre, and served on the Eyre Defence Committee, but his support was based on knowledge of Eyre's protection of South Australian aborigines against an extermination policy by settlers when he was a sheep farmer in the territory, and the consequent belief that Eyre would have been incapable of dealing unfairly with Jamaicans. Charles's support, by contrast, appears to have been based on the premise that, as a member of a superior race beleaguered by savages little better than animals, Eyre had behaved admirably.

Whereas Charles made a sharp division in his (very personal) perception of good and evil, Henry tended to blur the edges of such distinctions, with an emphasis on repentance and forgiveness that displays a transcendence of the rigid boundaries of mainstream mid-nineteenth century Christianity. This distinction between the two brothers is illustrated most strongly in their attitudes to Roman Catholicism and to monasticism, both Roman and Anglican.

In contrast to his brother's strictures on religion Henry Kingsley embraced a nominal Protestantism diffused by ecumenicalism and religious tolerance in his fiction and was generally diffident about his personal religious beliefs. The following passage from Hetty (1869) is a rare example of authorial comment on the subject:

For my part, I have known many ministers of religion. Roman Catholic verbiage, or Dissenting verbiage, may be offensive to the ear; but in twenty years I have only known two bad ministers of religion of any sect, and that is not a large percentage, after all: one speaks, of course, merely of a large personal acquaintance. Being on dangerous ground, I will step off it;



only enrolling my opinion that the ministers of religion, with all their eccentricities, are nearly the most valuable class in the community.<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate this belief, Mademoiselle Mathilde (1868) contains an unlikely alliance between a French Roman Catholic priest, a Dissenting minister and an Anglican rector; all of whom like and respect each other whilst agreeing to differ on subjects doctrinal.

In marked contrast to the intransigent and doctrinaire opinions of his brother, therefore, Henry Kingsley extended his tolerance to the Roman Catholic church. In his second novel, Ravenshoe, he accepts the apparent benevolence of Roman Catholic clergy at face value. A 'jolly good-humoured Irish priest', who admits to seeing nothing wrong in kissing 'a pretty girl in the way of fun, as I've done myself, sure.', and who is happy to smoke a cigar with his Protestant host, is exactly what he appears to be, and nothing more.<sup>6</sup> A fellow priest has 'one of the sweetest, kindest faces eye ever rested on'.<sup>7</sup> Henry's celibates are normal men, despite their status.

In deference to a largely Protestant readership, however, Henry initially tried to cloak his religious tolerance by adopting some of the common elements of anti-Catholic fiction. Ravenshoe is framed by a Protestant and Catholic babies-swapped-at-birth plot, with the obligatory Jesuit, Father Mackworth, attempting to control a large family fortune for the benefit of his church. Father Mackworth ensures that Charles Ravenshoe, the Protestant hero, is dispossessed of his inheritance. Charles' Catholic sister, Ellen, enters a convent unaware that she is a great heiress (the Jesuits know this of course) and Mackworth does all in his power to prevent restitution of Charles' rights. This would appear to be standard anti-Catholic writing in the same tradition as Mrs Trollope's earlier Father Eustace (1847) and Catherine Sinclair's Beatrice (1854) and Emma Jane Worboise's later Father Fabian (1875). Henry also gives space to the belief (famously expressed by his brother two years later) that the Roman Catholic church held an ambivalent attitude towards deceit by having Mackworth declare on his deathbed: 'I have been bound body and soul to the Church from a child, and I have done things which the Church will disapprove of when they are told, though not when they are kept secret.'<sup>8</sup> The Church, or rather, the Jesuits would approve the use of falsehoods to benefit themselves until these were discovered when they



would publicly disown the perpetrator thus displaying a particularly callous disregard for the value of truth.

However, throughout Ravenshoe Henry seems to be struggling to keep within the conventions of portraying Catholicism. Just as he follows a formulaic interpretation of Catholic truth, Henry Kingsley sticks to the usual depiction of Jesuits in mid-nineteenth century fiction as manipulative, cunning and dishonest. He diverges from this typically one-dimensional presentation in partly accounting for the Jesuit's actions by his traumatic childhood and by motivating him not only through loyalty to the Church, but also because of his love for the hero's brother. Charles' Jesuits, in Westward Ho! in particular, conform to the stereotype or are much worse. Henry, by contrast, implies that Father Mackworth's capacity for loyalty is a good thing, but badly misplaced: when he confesses at the end of the narrative he does so because '... the eyes of a dead man, of a man who was drowned bathing in the bay, haunt me day and night, and say, Speak out!', so that his finer feelings as a man overcome the invidious teaching of the Church.<sup>9</sup> The final judgement on Father Mackworth, by a fellow priest, is that, 'He was a good man brought up in a bad school.'<sup>10</sup>

Henry Kingsley tries to condemn the Church, but not all of those acting for it and within it: his 'good' Catholics are what they are despite the system, and his one 'bad' Catholic is probably fundamentally decent, but perverted by his training. And Fr. Mackworth, as a Jesuit, is seen as embodying all the vices of Roman Catholicism: he eavesdrops<sup>11</sup>, he obtains secrets in confession and uses them to empower himself, he conceals the truth, he is sexually attracted to Ellen<sup>12</sup> and his affection for Cuthbert is somewhat ambiguous. His power over Cuthbert reflects the popular notion of a totalitarian Roman Catholic Church which demanded absolute obedience and maintained a sado-masochistic relationship between itself and its communicants whilst proclaiming a great and all-encompassing mother love for them.

This is the presentation of the Church in Catherine Sinclair's Beatrice, particularly in the conversion of Bessie M'Ronald where Bessie is drawn into Roman Catholicism by Mrs Lorraine's (alias the Abbess of St Ignatia) feigned affection and concern and kept there by Father Eustace's discipline and threats. Charles Kingsley draws a similar picture in Yeast:

"Ave Maris Stella ... the star of Mary, immaculate, all-loving ... Would that you, too, would submit yourself to that guidance! You, too, would seem to



want some loving heart wheron to rest ... Oh, for solitude, meditation, penance! Oh, to make up by bitter self-punishment my ingratitude to her who has been leading me unseen, for years, home to her bosom?"<sup>13</sup>

The Church's totalitarianism is enforced by the way in which it pervades the lives of its followers and the pressure it is able to apply to them. Confession is used to monitor their lives (as in Westward Ho!, where Eustace's passion for Rose is wheedled out of him) and it would seem that, where land and money are involved, constant surveillance is needed. The Tierney brothers live with a wealthy Catholic landowner, and Fr. Mackworth is permanently at Ravenshoe, where, like Mrs Trollope's Father Eustace and Worboise's Father Fabian, he lives in a tower from which he exercises control. (The Tierney brothers seem to spend a fair amount of time at Ravenshoe which perhaps demonstrates that resident priests are not always all-pervasive and dominating.) Whereas Frs Eustace, Eustace and Fabian are assisted by disguised nuns, Father Mackworth works alone - Kingsley was perhaps reluctant to implicate a lady in his machinations. A network of priests conspire to conceal Ellen from her family and her lover when she enters a convent and goes to the Crimea to nurse.

Henry Kingsley's clergy in Ravenshoe, therefore, although mainly benevolent as individuals are still part of a patriarchal hierarchy whose aim is to dominate and control. Charles's clergy, although resorting to open violence in the Inquisition in Westward Ho!, are shown to be deceitful, manipulative and determined to succeed using whatever means come to hand. Henry's one priest who follows the pattern of other fictional priests, Fr. Mackworth, eventually succumbs to remorse.

When Cuthbert takes Charles' side in a quarrel with Father Mackworth, the latter muses over his rebellion in a manner indicative of the power and methods of the Church. Henry uses the metaphor of horsebreaking, analogous to slavery, to illustrate Mackworth's control over Cuthbert. There are also overtones of the saying, 'Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man'<sup>14</sup> notorious amongst anti-Catholic propagandists of the nineteenth century as personifying the control fetishism, and threat to Protestantism concealed therein, of the Jesuits:

"What queer wild blood there is in these Ravenshoses," said Mackworth to himself, when he was alone. "A younger hand than myself would have been surprised at Cuthbert's kicking after so much schooling. Not I. I shall never quite tame him, though he is broken in enough for all practical purposes. He



will be on his knees to-morrow for this. I like to make him kick; I shall do it sometimes for amusement; he is so much easier managed after one of these tantrums. By Jove! I love the man better every day; he is one after my own heart."<sup>15</sup>

In this instance Mackworth takes the system of love and punishment to an extreme by proposing to tempt or provoke Cuthbert to sin, not only so that he can induce guilt and then demand penance for the wrong done against the Church, but also for his own pleasure in seeing the suffering of the penitent. Again, the Jesuitical game of cat and mouse - of releasing their hold, particularly on converts, only to reel the penitent back in with threats and penances, was a feature of anti-Catholic fiction. The unfortunate Bessie M'Roland in Beatrice is subjected to this system, and it is part of Conrad's treatment of St Elizabeth in The Saint's Tragedy (Sinclair quotes from The Saint's Tragedy throughout Beatrice to illustrate what she considers the pointlessness, wickedness and deliberate cruelty of Roman Catholicism). Readers made familiar with the practices of the Spanish Inquisition by Charles' Westward Ho! would recognise the methodology of torture where the intervals of relief between the application of extreme pain were used to force a confession or conversion.

There is a sense throughout Ravenshoe of Cuthbert trying subconsciously to escape Fr. Mackworth, but this is only achieved by his death in which there is a certain irony as, watched by three priests, he dies unconfessed and without the last rites.<sup>16</sup> Cuthbert does not have available to him the distinction between family and church that exists for Argemone (Yeast) who seeks to escape a confining patriarchy for the perceived freedom that a Mercy house will offer. Family and church are so intertwined for Cuthbert that his only escape would be physical removal and even then it would be doubtful if he could escape the worldwide network of the Church.

What might be perceived today as a sado-masochistic relationship between Fr. Mackworth and Cuthbert is comparable to that between Conrad and St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Charles Kingsley's The Saint's Tragedy (1848). However, whereas Conrad is obsessed with his pupil's spiritual state and by the idea of creating a perfect saint and martyr, Fr. Mackworth's ambition is strictly temporal and concerned with keeping the wealth of the Ravenshoe estate within the Roman Catholic Church. Both, however, are concerned for their own status, both employ the same techniques of punishment and promise of reward in



attempting to achieve their objectives, both induce feelings of guilt in their subjects, and both demand absolute control over every aspect of their pupil's life. Conrad's relationship with St. Elizabeth is as sexually ambiguous as Mackworth's with Cuthbert, but whereas Charles is explicit, Henry is obscure.

Despite Fr. Mackworth's stereotypical behaviour Henry Kingsley still manages to generate sympathy for him mainly by chronicling his childhood after he was taken from his mother and left on the doorstep of a Catholic seminary:

Six years of friendless persecution, of life ungraced and uncheered by domestic love, of such bitter misery as childhood alone is capable of feeling or enduring, transformed him from a child into a heartless, vindictive man.<sup>17</sup>

His genuine, if perverse, affection for Cuthbert also offers some sort of redemption, although it is not fully articulated until Cuthbert's death: "Oh, my God, I loved him! My God! my God! I loved him!"<sup>18</sup> There is also a suggestion, which is never developed, that Mackworth is the illegitimate son of Lord Saltire.<sup>19</sup>

So, although Henry Kingsley, like his brother, may condemn the system of the Roman Catholic church, unlike Charles he allows that some of those operating within it, e.g. the Tiernay brothers, may well be ordinary decent human beings, and that others, like Fr. Mackworth, have had their potential for good all but destroyed. More explicitly, he sees the human soul rising above the restrictions of the Catholic church. Cuthbert gives thanks for Charles's narrow escape from drowning by unnecessarily carrying him home, barefoot, along a stony path, having given his shoes to the servant William, who lost his in the shipwreck (William is of course his brother, but Cuthbert doesn't know it at this point), and his jersey to Charles. These actions associate Cuthbert with some of the saints - St. Martin, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Christopher - in humbling himself for the service or benefit of those less well-off or further down the social scale than himself. The following authorial comment highlights the difference in the Kingsley brothers' approaches to Catholicism:

'Is this ridiculous? I cannot say I can see it in this light. I may laugh to scorn the religion that teaches men that, by artificially producing misery and nervous terror, and in that state flying to religion as a comfort and refuge, we may in any way glorify God, or benefit ourselves. I can laugh, I say, at a form of religion like this; but I cannot laugh at the men who believe in it, and



act up to it ... I say, "Well, Cuthbert, if you are a fool, you are a consistent and manly one at all events."<sup>20</sup>

The 'nervous terror' artificially produced by the Church is the fear of damnation and insistence on absolute obedience. Whereas Charles habitually condemns the followers of Catholicism as weak, foolish or 'feminine', and would have perceived Cuthbert's action as fundamentally selfish, as consciously trying to secure spiritual glory, Henry has the breadth of vision to admire those who have the courage of their convictions.

Having dealt with Catholicism generally and Jesuits in particular in Ravenshoe, Henry turns his attention to the aspect of Catholicism which was his brother's particular *bête noire*. Ellen Horton, having been seduced by Lord Welter, nobly refuses a sincere and eligible suitor because she has sinned and must repent. Joining a convent in London, she gets herself transferred to an Irish order, 'The Society of Mercy of St. Bridget' and goes to nurse in the Crimea, where, for the purposes of the plot, she encounters neither her brother Charles, who is wounded in the Charge of the Light Brigade, nor her lover Hornby, who is killed.<sup>21</sup> (Fr. Mackworth's purpose in encouraging her to enter a convent is to obtain control of her wealth for the Church. It was of course also the purpose of Frs Eustace, Eustace and Fabian to persuade or entrap an heiress into a convent.)

Henry Kingsley subscribes to the view that entering a convent was frequently the last resort of those disappointed in love, or who wished to atone for past sins, but also sees it as a practical form of penance. Cuthbert's efforts, if 'consistent and manly' are as pointless and artificial as the fasting and scourging of St. Elizabeth. Ellen's attempts to expiate her guilt have the practical result of helping others even when carried to the extent of, like St. Elizabeth, breaking her own health. The notion of female self-sacrifice for others, rather than for the more abstract concepts of the Church or personal spiritual salvation was a theme Henry was to develop in his subsequent writing.

When Ellen returns to Ravenshoe at the end of the novel her beauty is much altered by her suffering, but to Kingsley there is a terrible glory about it:

The complexion was deadly pale, and the features were pinched, but she was more beautiful than ever. I declare I believe that if we had seen a ring of glory round her head at that moment none of us would have been surprised. Just then, her beauty, her nun's dress, and the darkness of the hall, assisted the illusion, probably; but there was really something saintlike and romantic



about her, for an instant or so, which made us all stand silent. Alas! there was no ring of glory round her head. Poor Ellen was only bearing the cross, she had not won the crown.<sup>22</sup>

Kingsley sets up a dramatically romantic and mystical portrait of Ellen, only to bring it sharply into reality - Ellen is no stained glass medieval saint, but a hard-working modern woman, she is still 'only bearing the cross'. This presentation of Ellen, as properly penitent and working out her sin through association with the nursing heroines of the Crimea and with Florence Nightingale, the great British heroine of the nineteenth century, is a positive one in a novel which works hard to stay within an anti-Catholic framework. However, Henry tries to lessen this positive presentation by emphasising the spiritual aspect of Ellen's celibacy - a bizarre concept for the majority of contemporary readers:

"Charles," said she, " I do right to wear weeds, for I am the widow of - (Never mind what she said; that sort of thing very properly jars on Protestant ears.)"<sup>23</sup>

This phrase is repeated again a little further on in the narrative, as if to emphasise some sort of disapproval. After Ellen leaves, the narrator comments: 'I have not seen her since. Perhaps she is best where she is.' Ellen does not reappear in the narrative and it's possible that Henry was trying to emphasise the finality of entering the convent, of disappearing from the world to an unseen existence - one of the more sinister aspects of conventual life frequently portrayed in fiction (the fate of Theresa da Hosta in Beatrice, for instance).

The contrast between the presentation of Ellen as saintlike and the almost immediate disapproval of her celibacy suggests tension between Henry's personal opinions and his attempts to conform to the conventional Protestant standpoint on convents. If Henry Kingsley found difficulty in balancing his opinions on convents with public expectation, Charles had no such problems. He not only disapproved of what he perceived as the selfish ethos of the religious life (Yeast), but also thoroughly detested celibacy for both men and women.

If Charles condemned Roman Catholicism far more thoroughly and methodically than his brother, in The Saint's Tragedy he saw, like Henry, that the individual could transcend the system. St. Elizabeth's martyrdom is heroic, despite what Charles perceives as the moral degeneracy which induces it, in the same way that Cuthbert's penance of carrying



his brother is heroic to Henry. The individual spirit will remain true to itself against the Catholic church's attempts to break and remould those it holds in thrall.

Henry, however, drew very different conclusions about female monasticism from his brother. After Ravenshoe he increasingly included in his fiction Roman Catholic nuns and Anglican Sisters, as well as women who work selflessly for the good of their families whilst setting aside considerations of their own personal happiness. These women are frequently perceived as being saintly or nun-like or are associated with the more practical and down-to-earth imagery of Sisters of Mercy.

In Henry Kingsley's attempt at a political novel, Austin Elliot (1863), the heroine, Eleanor is given to Tractarianism and all that it implies and at one point is advised against going over to Rome by Austin.<sup>24</sup> Later Austin suspects her of having an association with a Sisterhood, or a spiritual advisor who advocates the performance of penances or pilgrimages, because once a month she dresses poorly and goes to a slum area of London.<sup>25</sup> In fact, she is secretly visiting her brother (long believed dead) in prison, and while her family suspect her of High Church excesses she is regarded with horror, approval is expressed when it is discovered that she is operating, albeit clandestinely, within the family unit.

Emma Burton (The Hillyars and the Burtons) dedicates her life to her crippled brother and refuses an offer of marriage because of him and because she feels the marriage would ruin her suitor socially. Unlike Eleanor, she extends her mission outside the family, cares for a mentally deranged woman and drowns at sea whilst returning a runaway adulteress to her husband.

In these two instances, Henry acknowledges the convention that women had a duty to serve, and even sacrifice themselves, within the family circle, and possibly perform charitable work within closely-defined social and geographical boundaries. Charles Kingsley, for example, approved of district visiting and of the duty of upper and upper-middle class women to instruct and set an example to the poor, as Honoria does in Yeast, for example. However, he was opposed to women forming organisations or communities to carry out this work on a more professional basis. Henry, on the other hand, was happy to enlarge the sphere of women's action, saw no objection to Sisterhoods and convents as a means of doing this, and approved both the conventual system and the work done by nuns and Sisters.



A central character in Silcote of Silcotes, the unacknowledged daughter-in-law of the local squire, joins an Anglican sisterhood in order to nurse in the Crimea where her husband (who disowns her) is serving, and then some years later becomes matron at the school where her son (who does not recognise her) is boarding. The school is an old City foundation relocated to magnificent new neo-Gothic premises in the country, and is clearly based on the High Church anxiety to provide properly grounded education for the sons of the middle classes which led to a spate of public school building (Lancing and Hurstpierpoint, for example) in the mid-nineteenth century. Henry emphasises the matron's experience and professionalism: 'She has been used to everything pretty nigh, from her testimonials. She was in the Crimea to begin with. The doctors at the Small-pox Hospital at Manchester wrote and asked for her.'<sup>26</sup> In addition to the training, the discipline of belonging to a community has a salutary effect, creating nobility of character and fixed purpose where a certain wildness existed before. In deference to his readership, Henry ensures that his Sister takes no vows, nor wears a habit and wimple, although she does dress in grey with a cross hanging from her belt and radiates an aura of strength and calm which he attributes to her 'High Church training'.

The heroine of Number Seventeen enters a Sisterhood, 'a society of religious ladies', improbably based in Wales, on the death of her husband and the apparent death of her son, and lives there happily for some 20 years (there is no detailed account of her life there in the narrative).<sup>27</sup> She then recreates herself as a fashionable milliner. In Stretton Eleanor Evans is a strong-minded woman who lives alone and manages her own farm and refuses to talk to potential suitors about anything other than 'medical science and the management of nursing sisterhoods'. Despite her self-imposed spinsterhood (although she does marry eventually) and pretensions to the masculine preserves of farm management and science, she is shown not to have lost the essential female qualities of domesticity and caring in her love for her nephews and nieces.<sup>28</sup>

In September 1870 Kingsley, who was at that time the editor of the Edinburgh Daily Review, travelled to France to report on the Franco-Prussian war, arriving in Ardennes in time for the battle of Sédan. His war correspondence was genuinely distinguished and dealt particularly with the terrible carnage resulting from the development of new weapons. The new breech-loading rifles, the chassepot and its Prussian equivalent, the *Zundnadel-gevehr*, inflicted terrible wounds, particularly the latter due to the larger size of the bullet, while the



*mitrailleuse*, an early breech-loading machine gun, was capable of far more rapid fire than had previously been experienced in European warfare; in addition new and more deadly artillery had been developed. In his report of 7 September, Kingsley claimed that ‘... the field of Sédan is the grandest slaughter which the world has ever seen [...] 80,000 [French] men have capitulated with 600 guns, and I consider that at least there are 40,000 in killed alone.’<sup>29</sup> In a report a few days earlier he had declared ‘... it is no longer a war, it is a butchery.’<sup>30</sup>

While apparently reluctant to deny that war, and a ‘great battlefield’ were ‘glorious’ Kingsley placed most emphasis on the mass slaughter and on the horrendous injuries of the dead which were unlike any witnessed before in Europe:

The men’s entrails were torn out; their heads were blown to pieces, and such was the unutterable ruin in this part of the field that I came across a solitary hand lying on the trampled onions and there was not a solitary corpse within twenty yards of it.<sup>31</sup>

From dealing with the effect of war on the individual soldier, and, later on the effect of the peasantry upon whose land the fighting was taking place, Kingsley looks at the landscape of the battlefield as a whole:

One of the first things which strikes me on a great battle-field like this is its wonderful picturesqueness. No one can say that troops in a line, under drill, are picturesque; but shatter them into heaps and they become picturesque at once. The mass of scarlet and blue clothes which lies all around you is very beautiful indeed, and the grouping (to use an artist’s term) is always fine. If you go on to a great field like this, however, and wish to be sentimental, you should avoid looking into the dead men’s faces too closely, and should hold your nose as hard as you can.<sup>32</sup>

Again, Kingsley does not condemn warfare, but lets the practicality of its sights and smells undercut his first description of the battlefield as picturesque. A large part of his correspondence dealt with the work of the Red Cross, which included volunteer lady nurses, Sisters and nuns, in treating and nursing the wounded, particularly their difficulty in dealing with injuries that they had not encountered before under primitive and dangerous conditions.

Kingsley was to include his war experiences in some of his later fiction.

‘Malmaison’ in the collection of short stories, *Hornby Mills* (1872), features a Huguenot girl



who converts to Catholicism (apparently painlessly), enters a convent, nurses the wounded and is finally seen trying to cross enemy lines on a secret mission for the Jesuits. Despite the obvious sensationalism of the narrative, her moral and physical bravery is never in doubt, and Kingsley is unjudgemental about her association with the Jesuits.

In Valentin (1872), subtitled 'A French Boy's Story of Sédan', Kingsley again made use of his war experiences. Wounded at Sédan, Valentin is cared for by two English Sisters of Mercy who show themselves to be spunky, practical and unfazed by anything. On their first appearance in a makeshift hospital making an initial examination of casualties from Sédan one warns the other: "This Turco is not dead, however, mind his knife, my love; remember the escape you had at Bazeilles."<sup>33</sup> The Sisters are not only nursing under fire and coping with the bloody aftermath of the biggest battle Europe had ever seen to date, but are also dealing with ignorant non-Christians who may misunderstand their motives and attack them. After the examination the Sister remarks:

"This Turco here will make a mess of his leg, if we can't get this bullet out. I wonder where Dr Kerkstone is? O, here he is, and alone. Who on earth is to hold the arteries?" "I will do that," said the shorter lady. And she did it, and I could give you her name, if she would allow me.

Not only do the Sisters demonstrate personal bravery, but also consummate professionalism.

Later they deliver Valentin's wife's baby.<sup>34</sup> Their approach to their work is an extension of Penelope Holland's assertion that modern ladies were not afraid of 'compromising [their] dignity by doing anything which requires doing' and that they were not lacking in 'pluck' and that 'our countrywomen are to be found in all parts of the world, roughing it merrily on wretched accommodation and villainous food'.<sup>35</sup> The Monthly Packet's 'Papers on Sisterhoods' also stressed the necessity of personal courage and willingness to tackle anything.

In contrast to the view held by many Protestants that women who entered a convent were feeble-minded and afraid of facing the world<sup>36</sup> Henry acknowledges the courage of women who embraced the conventual life, both in taking such a step and in carrying out the difficult and often dangerous work entrusted to them. The heroine of his French Revolution novel Mademoiselle Mathilde (1868) is an aristocratic Roman Catholic exiled to England with a taste for Non-Conformist services and a vocation to work indefatigably for her less



fortunate neighbours: 'The Romanists were then, as they are now, *au fait* with the machinery of charity; and Mademoiselle Mathilde was a Romanist, and so she went to the old man.'<sup>37</sup> Like Marie de Fougelaye Mathilde is aware of her obligations to the poor both as a Catholic and as an aristocrat (albeit displaced).

Mademoiselle Mathilde makes a gesture towards depicting some of the conventions of fictional Roman Catholicism - the heroine's sister is threatened with going into a nunnery after a disastrous engagement, Mathilde secretly reads the Bible although forbidden to do so by her Church - but the attitude towards the Church is sympathetic. The French priest, Fr. Martin, is sensible and sensitive, and the actions of a convent in France are heroic. In an age when women were generally considered incapable of forming autonomous communities without men, Henry acknowledges the strength and empowerment of the women within such communities.

Sisters and nuns in Henry Kingsley's fiction are generally in unenclosed orders and work for the good of the community. In Mademoiselle Mathilde the convent in France is divided between those who are contemplative and those who run a home for the blind and imbecile some distance from the mother house. Initially, a distinction is made between the enclosed sisters at St. Catherine's and those at La Garaye. The former, personified by their Abbess, conform to the stereotype of women living without men as spineless and incapable of rational thought, the latter, by contrast, as capable and intelligent:

There were seven well-trained Sisters of Charity, oldish women, tried for nerve and for gentleness, trained scientifically under the best doctors: religiously with such light as they had.<sup>38</sup>

Kingsley is working against the popular image of beautiful pale young women living out a passive and monotonous existence - silently gliding through cloisters in prayer and meditation. These Sisters are actively engaging with the outside world and making provision for its outcasts. Moreover, they are not simply amateurs ministering as best they can but experienced professionals - 'oldish' and 'tried for nerve' - who have received training for a career in caring for the blind and mentally disabled.

In comparison their Abbess is incapable of rational action when her petticoats catch fire and the emergency is dealt with 'coolly and efficiently' by the Sisters of Charity.<sup>39</sup> However, when St. Catherine's and La Garaye are attacked by *sansculottes* the nuns show a



unified fixity of purpose - those at the convent praying and waiting for death in the chapel despite efforts made to persuade them to abandon their duty, while the Abbess, suddenly 'brave, dignified and grand' considers her place to be with the patients at La Garaye. The Sisters defend the patients until the hospital is burned and the inmates dispersed by the Revolutionaries. St. Catherine's is also attacked and burned, and Sister Priscilla dies trying to stop a peasant taking away the pyx. Henry points out that taking responsibility for her community brings out the best in the Abbess who then leads the sisters across country to her family home at Montauban to form another community of women with Adele. (In the same way Yonge's women often show surprising reserves of strength.) The nuns' sense of unity gives them collective strength, so that they are empowered to act in a way that would be impossible individually. At Montauban the example of their innocence and purity reforms a household that has become a byword for depravity. As in Ravenshoe, Kingsley tempers his admiration for their actions by expressing doubts about their religion:

... women whose lives had been given to God and to good works. Old enough some of them to be grandmothers; simple in the ways of the world as babies; utterly helpless, yet perfectly brave, with a bravery beyond that of a soldier: for they could die these silly women, without fear; for what was death but the gate of glory? There they stood, possibly to some eyes ridiculous, not to mine: their dress was unbecoming and their shoes were large; they were none of them in the least degree beautiful. ... They were dressed in clothes, purposely made ridiculously distinctive by the founder of their order: they looked, on the whole, absurd, and their belief was in many respects childishly superstitious; yet they knew how to die, these silly women, as well as the best brandy-primed Marseillais of them all. I cannot laugh at these women. I know their ignorance like another, but I would make a deeper reverence to any one of them than ever I would do to a duchess.<sup>40</sup>

Kingsley shows how the nuns appear to outsiders, how they are perceived by non-Roman Catholics, that is, 'ridiculous', pseudo-medieval and almost intentionally absurd. Their appearance is deliberately anti-heroic: they are old, plain, badly-dressed, with big feet - the antithesis of the typical heroine of Victorian fiction. Even their religion is suspect, 'childishly superstitious'. What makes them heroic is their personal and collective integrity. Their strength lies in their shared faith and in their sense of community. As in Ravenshoe,



Kingsley admires the individual rather than the system, but also admires the group's sense of comradeship, and the collective strength their religion gives them.

Similarly, the community of women imprisoned in the Conciergerie is mutually supportive, the group dynamic as a whole reflecting the interdependency between the Fat Countess and her sister, so that the microcosm of sisterly love becomes the macrocosm of sisterhood. Finally, the idea of female self-sacrifice is personalized by Mathilde's dying in place of her sister - an act which enables the rest of her family, and the Abbess and her convent, to escape to England.<sup>41</sup> Kingsley's emphasis on the strength of female relationships in Mademoiselle Mathilde is at odds with much contemporary thought on the subject, which held that women were incapable of forming autonomous communities (the Saurin v. Starr trial for example).

Kingsley's last novel, The Grange Garden (1876), proposes the notion of an ecumenical female community with two women, one a Roman Catholic, the other a Non-Conformist, who have renounced society and live together in a house with a walled garden.<sup>42</sup> A walled garden was a familiar symbol of the enclosed life in paintings of convents in the mid-nineteenth century, and Henry's intention seems to have been to invoke not only the images of restraint and confinement associated with the convent but also the idea of peace and healing.<sup>43</sup> The women, Lady Madeleine Howard and Lady Alice Browne, were obviously inspired by the Ladies of Llangollen, Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, who acquired some notoriety in the 1770s by eloping to live together in a Welsh cottage where they created a celebrated garden.<sup>44</sup> Both the fictional and non-fictional pairs of women had rejected attempts by their families to arrange marriages for them.

The first volume of The Grange Garden has a strong Gothic element: the door of the garden is always locked, it is rumoured to be inhabited by a masked and cowled monk and a female ghost, and a large and heavy object presumed to be a coffin arrives at midnight. However, the Gothic scenario is built up only to be dissolved by rational explanation. Underneath the mask, the 'monk', Lionel, is hideously disfigured by injuries received in a duel but gradually heals to something like normality, while the garden simultaneously loses its mystique and becomes a place of sanctuary, and the 'ghost' is revealed to be the monk's sister. Similarly, Kingsley creates a picture of the Belgian convent which Lionel's estranged wife, Edith, enters (he believes her to be unfaithful) which is rumoured to be run under strict and terrible discipline and where the wife 'began the digging of her own grave'.<sup>45</sup>



The convent is run by the 'Stephanocanthine' order and the nuns are denied speech, possess nothing and wear each others' clothes. The prediction that Edith will be metaphorically buried alive is not realised and, although Edith later transfers to the mother house, and then to nursing work in Brussels, the convent turns out to be a harmonious and happy home, where Edith, like her husband at the Grange, finds peace and healing.

In the chapter devoted to the convent (Vol I, chapter XXIII) Henry sets up the accepted anti-conventual imagery only to debunk it. The discipline is apparently harsh and unremitting and punishment is severe. The nuns supposedly 'dig their own graves', but Henry goes on to explain that, due to sanitary regulations, they do not actually ever occupy them. Refractory sisters suddenly disappear, and are supposed to have been bricked up in a cellar by 'some of the half-secular, half-religious people who gain a livelihood by hanging about the gates of the holy garden, and occasionally getting glimpses of the glory inside, which generally ends, in such low minds as theirs, by their thinking themselves well off where they are.'<sup>46</sup> In reality, the sisters are transferred to the mother house, where:

It is very seldom that a nun passes back into the world from *that* establishment: rarely save in cases of gross misconduct, and against her own will, does that happen. Any nun can be liberated within twenty-four hours, by the civil power, but not one is ever remembered to have desired it.<sup>47</sup>

Kingsley is again working against the stereotype of the convent and presenting a harmonious and happy environment: 'The surliest of ascetics would have grown bright for a moment had he seen the girls laughing and working among the flowers ...'.<sup>48</sup> The nuns at Brussels are free to come and go as they please, but choose to stay. In the same way the trout living in the stream running through the Grange garden prefer to stay within its confines, although they have freedom to go where they please. Lady Alice, the Non-Conformist on hearing of life at the convent refers to it as 'dissipated' compared to life at the Grange,<sup>49</sup> and later remarks to Lady Madeleine, the Roman Catholic, 'They obviously don't starve people in those precious old convents of yours, Madeleine.'<sup>50</sup>

Just as the monk and the garden are stripped of their mystique, so is Edith's life at the convent, and in the same way, the enclosed existence of Madeleine and Alice at the Grange, at first perceived as sinister and perverse, is revealed to be thoroughly domestic and content, if eccentric. Their contentment is accentuated by comparison with the *ménage* of

Lionel's two brothers, Arthur and George, who live together in perpetual disharmony and Godlessness. There is a certain comic tension created by the disparity between Madeleine and Alice's concepts of Christianity, but no fanaticism: 'The fact of the matter was that they were both Christians, and that the mere details of their creed sat very lightly upon them.'<sup>43</sup> Throughout the narrative religion is perceived as joyful rather than contentious and personified by Father Wilson, the kind-hearted and well-intentioned Jesuit who jokes about his order's quest for universal power.<sup>51</sup> There is obviously a vast difference between Father Wilson and other fictional Jesuits, not least in Fr Wilson's acknowledgement of widespread perceptions about his order and finding a source of amusement in them.

When Lionel's brother George is ill, Edith puts on her nun's habit and goes to nurse him, explaining:

Shortly after I left the Stephanocanthonites and came back to the old convent, I was detailed for a year to work in the Brussels hospitals as a sister of mercy. Such a course is very frequently taken with sisters of our order who have been married. I fancy that you will find few professed nurses better than myself.<sup>52</sup>

George's butler is not at all fazed by a nun on the doorstep assuming her to be 'one of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who occasionally came that way', but is surprised to learn she is his master's sister-in-law.<sup>53</sup> Kingsley is here representing the nun as a serving member of society not to be differentiated from other well-intentioned and hard-working women other than in her professionalism.

From Ravenshoe where he was struggling to keep within the structure of anti-Catholic fiction, Kingsley moved to a position of almost evangelizing ecumenism and religious tolerance. His journalism for an Edinburgh-based Free Church newspaper, The Daily Review, which was contemporaneous with his later fiction, displays the religious and ethical tensions of his earlier work as he attempted to produce a newspaper within the moral and spiritual boundaries of a denomination very far removed from his own liberal beliefs.

The Free Church's dominant outlook was a revived Calvinism marked by an intransigent dogmatism and a strict adherence to the doctrines of predestination and the divine decrees. It also stood for Sabbatarianism and temperance and its membership had gained a reputation for widespread indifference to the Arts. Inside Scotland the Free Church was seen as the voice of Puritanism; outside Scotland it gave the whole nation that



reputation, being popularly associated with hostility not only to alcohol and Sabbath-breaking, but also to gambling, dancing, the theatre and most commonplace pleasures. The Free Church was associated with the more well-to-do classes and gave the impression of middle-class disapproval of working-class enjoyment. Politically, the Free Church tended to be Liberal, and its newspapers were generally interested in internal affairs, the defence of the Free Church, and Liberal policies. It was anti-Roman Catholic. Henry Kingsley's cheerful ecumenism would therefore have been at odds with the Calvinistic puritanism of The Daily Review's proprietors.

Henry Kingsley was editor of The Daily Review from October 1869 to May 1871 and at the beginning of his career there caught the aftermath of the Saurin v. Starr case. He began by conforming to his proprietor's viewpoint. The issue of 5 November 1869 carried a review of a short story in The Gentleman's Magazine for that month. 'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery' was a typically salacious tale of unwilling postulants and lecherous priests. The opening paragraph promised readers a daily life as different from the Mercy convent in Hull 'as the icefields of Greenland differ from the sandy desert of Sahara', and proceeded to fulfil expectations. The Daily Review commented that: "'A Peep at a Neapolitan Nunnery" will do good service by strengthening the growing disgust with convent life.'<sup>54</sup>

The proposed Government inquiry into monastic institutions which was a direct result of the Saurin v. Starr case also merited The Daily Review's approbation, although the editor deplored the fact that the mover of a motion to establish such a committee, Charles Newdegate, had to defeat the Government: 'We are glad of it for the sake of the thing to be done, but the operation is not one to repeated too often with impunity.'<sup>55</sup>

This was followed up some days later by comment on Roman Catholic opposition to such an inquiry: 'Of course, the retort made by the supporters of the inquiry is, if you have nothing to conceal why create all this hubbub?'<sup>56</sup> A month or so later, Kingsley was fulminating in an editorial that: 'it is not to be tolerated - and, whatever the policy or the necessities of a Government, will not be long tolerated - that there should be in our midst spots from which the law is shut out, and another allegiance is recognised than that which is due from the citizens to the State.'<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to this toeing of the Free Church line, however, Henry also included items favourable to conventualism generally, and particularly to Anglican Sisterhoods. A quarter of a report on the farewell speech of the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, was

concerned with the Bishop's praise of the Sisterhoods established in his diocese which included Clewer and Wantage.<sup>58</sup> The 'Literature' column on 11 January 1870 included a lengthy review of an article in Macmillan's Magazine on the Deaconess's' Institute at Kaiserswerth by Elizabeth Sewell with the comments: 'Miss Sewell is a sensible High Church lady' and:

The value of the article consists in the fact that such high praise is given to these women by a woman, known for her good works for many years, who holds quite different opinions on the details of religion from these Lutherans. It is a lesson in true liberality which Anglican and Puritan might well lay to heart.<sup>59</sup>

Kingsley goes on to display his own knowledge of Sisterhoods:

By the bye, we speak with great deference, but has not Miss Sewell made an error? She says there are but two sets of sisterhoods in England which are unconventional, those at King's College Hospital and those at Burton Crescent. Surely she has forgotten the Nurses of St. Peter, who are under the patronage of the most popular of the successors of St. Augustine, Tait the Scotchman, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Although a Free Church paper might include the farewell speech of an eminent Anglican bishop, it seems strange, given Free Church tenets, that so much column space should be devoted to Wilberforce's connection with the Sisterhood movement. Similarly, the Lutheran precepts of the Kaiserswerth Institute might find favour with The Daily Review's readers, but the article reviewed was written by the sister of William Sewell, a prominent member of the Oxford Movement, and Kingsley's praise of religious tolerance sat uneasily on the inflexible bedrock of the Free Church.

On 14 April 1870 Henry reprinted a letter to The Times from Lady Gertrude Douglas, who had spent five years in a Roman Catholic convent, defending conventual life and claiming that her stay there had been very happy.<sup>60</sup> The next day's edition included a further letter from The Times in reply to Lady Gertrude's noting that: '... the picture she paints of convent life is strikingly at variance in some material points with that which was presented so fully and clearly in the famous Saurin v. Starr case.'<sup>61</sup> The day after, a letter to the Editor of The Daily Review about the proposed Convent Inquiry stated that not all



convents or conventual experiences were as happy as Lady Gertrude's.<sup>62</sup> Although much of Henry's reporting of religious matters was more tolerant than might be expected in a Free Church newspaper, he also included scandalous (and possibly apocryphal) nun stories, probably copied from national newspapers. 'A Chase after Nuns' reported that a rich but insane girl was removed from a convent in Manchester by Roman Catholic relatives intending to place her in a nunnery in Germany but an elder, Protestant, brother managed to prevent her from being taken abroad.<sup>63</sup> 'Runaway Nuns' reported a rumour that two nuns had escaped from the Mount St. Joseph Convent of Mercy, Strabane. One had disappeared and the other had fled to New York.<sup>64</sup> A letter on 9 May 1870 commented on a story of a nun from Bedlam's End, Badderley (*sic*) Clinton, Warwickshire, who escaped from her convent, was judged insane but was taken back into the convent<sup>65</sup>, and called for Government inspection of convents.

Escape stories were a regular feature of anti-conventual literature and these are typical of the genre. During the Saurin v Starr trial the previous year occurrences of such reports in newspapers seem to have increased proportionally to public interest in the case. It's impossible to judge whether these reports were genuine, or simply included for shock-horror value as audience pleasers.

During Henry's editorship The Daily Review championed women's causes and an editorial on 21 January, 1870, 'Women's Votes and Why They Want Them' was strongly in favour of women's suffrage, specifically for single women with the appropriate property qualification. Henry suggested that there was something wrong if 'Miss Burdett Coutts may not give a single vote for a member of Parliament in respect of say, three thousand houses of which each will separately confer a vote on any one man'. He felt that appropriate women's suffrage would be influential in establishing careers for women:

On one point indeed it may have an important influence; we mean the claim of women, and especially single women, to have as many bread-winning careers as possible opened to them in our day. And any influence it may have in this direction we shall gladly hail, as a step towards the remedying of one great evil in our crowded civilization.<sup>66</sup>

Kingsley is here acknowledging not only that many women needed to work but also their right to be self-supporting.



On 1 January 1870 Kingsley published a plea for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866 and 1869 signed by, amongst others, Harriet Martineau, Josephine Butler and Florence Nightingale. He added an editorial comment asking for other women to join a 'Ladies Association' for the repeal of the Acts.

Another cause particularly close to Henry's heart seems to have been the plight of female students at Edinburgh University, especially the five female medical students who were excluded from studying anatomy with their male counterparts. The reason given for this by Professor Laycock to the General Council of the university was '... how were they to ascertain when a Magdelene came to their classes?'. The professor also doubted that student behaviour would improve if ladies of their own age joined them in lectures.<sup>67</sup> Professor Laycock was choosing to defend the majority of male students from the potentially invidious and corrupting influence of five women. As these women were almost certainly upper-middle class and highly educated it seems unlikely that they would be 'Magdalenes', although the Professor may have feared that the sight of the naked human body might have excited them and that this excitement might have communicated itself to male students with unfortunate, if not immoral results and corresponding decline in behaviour. The Professor did not seem to consider that the sight of naked bodies being cut up might be offensive or distressing to the lady students - his concern seemed to be exclusively for the male students, and the disturbing effect the presence of women, who were not acting in accordance with his own theories of female behaviour, might have upon them.<sup>68</sup>

Kingsley was derisive about Professor Laycock's attitude and also about the exclusion of ladies from botany classes for the same, publicly unacknowledged, reasons: 'But what are we to say to people who allow promiscuous dancing and refuse to allow promiscuous Botany? *Reductio ad absurdum*.'<sup>69</sup> By the end of 1870 botany classes were mixed and so were most of the classes at the medical school.

Kingsley gave prominence and high praise to the lady students' examination results and was a vigorous supporter of Miss Edith Pechey, a student in the medical school, who came top of her year and gained the bronze medal prize. However, the faculty refused to award her the Hope Scholarship which went with the medal, giving it to the highest achieving male student. Editorials and correspondence about this went on for a couple of weeks, and on 11 April 1870 Kingsley was indignant at the University Senatus' decision not



only to refuse Miss Pechey the Hope Scholarship, but also to award women students ordinary certificates, not honours, although they had qualified for the latter.<sup>70</sup>

In 1871 Kingsley lost his job with The Daily Review and after living in London for a while finally settled in Cuckfield, Sussex, in 1874, when he was diagnosed as having cancer of the tongue (he had been a very heavy smoker). During the final stages of his illness in 1876 he was nursed firstly by Sister Martha from the Society of St Margaret, East Grinstead, and then, in the final month of his life, by Sister Irene Mary, who also attended his funeral. The following year, according to the Society's diary, Sister Irene Mary 'went to nurse Mrs Alfred Tennyson at Clifton'.

Henry Kingsley's attitude towards Sisterhoods and convents can be seen as complementary to his support for women's suffrage and education. He not only actively campaigned for women's higher education, but also held a high opinion of their intellectual capabilities generally and was scornful of men, such as Professor Laycock, who denigrated their achievements, or who were dismissive of their capabilities. Arthur Silcote (Silcote of Silcotes) held the sort of opinions that Kingsley was opposed to:

His [Arthur Silcote's] ideas about women, about their powers of intellect [...] their natural capabilities of learning logical reasoning [...] are not of much value, seeing that he knew nothing whatever about them. But he would real it you off by the yard about women, with his hands in his pocket comfortably, and would leave you with the impression that they were to be tolerated, but that he did not think much of them. Miss Austen! Oh certainly, but then any one could write a novel. Her novels were far better than Smollett's or Fielding's? Certainly, they were more entertaining and were without the element of coarseness. Mrs Somerville and Miss Herschell? They had shown a certain capacity for figures. Mrs Hemans? Pretty idea of rhythm and pathos. Miss Barrett? Well, he would give you Miss Barrett, if you came to that, provided you admitted her to be an exception [...] Madame Dudevant, then? No, on no account. She only reproduced that rebellion against formulas which expressed itself in the lower thought of the Reformation and the French Revolution. [...] Miss Brontë? A good and nervous, though coarse, describer of a narrow landscape. And so on.<sup>71</sup>

Arthur Silcote is expressing the commonly-held view that women's intellectual capabilities were quick and superficial, that they were incapable of exploring any subject logically or in real depth. It is the attitude expressed by Mr Stelling in The Mill on the Floss (1860) and by

Romney Leigh in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh (1856).<sup>72</sup> Romney Leigh goes on to suggest, like Arthur Silcote, that women's intellectual and artistic achievement naturally falls into a different, inferior category to men's.<sup>73</sup> Unlike Barrett Browning, however, who deals exclusively with women's artistic capabilities, by including Mrs Somerville and Miss Herschel in Arthur Silcotes deprecations, Kingsley is implying that women's scientific achievements should also be acknowledged as equal to men's.

Henry Kingsley, in comparison to the Arthur Silcotes of his world, seems to have had a great deal of admiration for women who attempted to expand the boundaries of accepted middle-class female behaviour - the lady medical students, for example, and the Edinburgh Ladies' Educational Association which campaigned for higher education for women.<sup>74</sup> (His wife organised a 'Petition to Parliament Respecting the Medical Education of Women'.<sup>75</sup>) He also lent his support to controversial and radical contemporary issues which concerned women more generally, such as the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the extension of the suffrage to women householders. He saw the lack of 'bread-winning careers' for single women as a 'great evil in our crowded civilization'.<sup>76</sup>

Kingsley's fiction tended to feature women who were strong and independent but without losing their essential femininity or ladyhood. Mrs Sugden/Silcote (Silcotes), for example, rejects her husband, works in the fields and nurses in the Crimea, but retains her beauty, is always essentially a lady and never loses her maternal instincts. Kingsley saw that there was a link between women's natural capacity for caring and their innate, but sublimated moral and physical strengths. Unlike many of his contemporaries he also recognised that women were capable of being mutually supportive and that collective organisation could develop their strengths and their ability to nurture. The Sisters and nuns in his fiction demonstrate that women were not only able to live together harmoniously but that they were also recognised that women were capable of being mutually supportive and that collective organisation could develop their strengths and their ability to nurture. The Sisters and nuns in his fiction demonstrate that women could live together harmoniously and that they were also willing to undergo training for professional careers and then to act competently and on their own initiative within those professions. Kingsley's Sisters represent a microcosm of nineteenth-century women's unfulfilled potential.





- <sup>1</sup> John Oxenham, 'In Christ there is no East or West', c.1870
- <sup>2</sup> J S D Mellick, The Passing Guest (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1983)  
William H Scheuerle, The Neglected Brother (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1971)  
S M Ellis, Henry Kingsley (London: Grant Richards, 1931)
- <sup>3</sup> Henry Kingsley, Valentin. A French Boy's Story of Sedan 2 vols (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1872), vol.1, p.154. Henry Kingsley was a friend and great admirer of Lewis Carroll (C L Dodgson), and thought Through the Looking Glass (1871) superior to Alice in Wonderland(1865). Henry apparently features in the latter as the March Hare, while Charles is supposedly the Mad Hatter (J Elwyn Jones and J Francis Gladstone, The Red King's Dream, or Lewis Carroll in Wonderland (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995). One of Dodgson's sisters joined an Anglican Sisterhood.
- <sup>4</sup> The slaughter of prisoners by gladiators in the amphitheatre at Alexandria in Hypatia (1853), for example.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry Kingsley, 'Hetty' in Hetty and Other Stories (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1871) Chap.25
- <sup>6</sup> Henry Kingsley, Ravenshoe [1862] (London: J M Dent & Sons, 1906), p.85
- <sup>7</sup> Ravenshoe, p.159
- <sup>8</sup> Ravenshoe, p.450
- <sup>9</sup> Ravenshoe, p.451
- <sup>10</sup> Ravenshoe, p.455
- <sup>11</sup> Ravenshoe, p.17
- <sup>12</sup> Ravenshoe, p.86
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Kingsley, Yeast [1851] (London: Macmillan & Co, 1908), p.203
- <sup>14</sup> Attributed to St Ignatius Loyola.
- <sup>15</sup> Ravenshoe, p.86
- <sup>16</sup> Ravenshoe, p.331
- <sup>17</sup> Ravenshoe, p.26
- <sup>18</sup> Ravenshoe, p.331
- <sup>19</sup> Ravenshoe, p.101
- <sup>20</sup> Ravenshoe, p.121
- <sup>21</sup> The Roman Catholic nursing sisters who went to Scutari with Nightingale were from the Mercy convent in Baggot Street, Dublin, where the protagonists in the Saurin v. Starr case originated.
- <sup>22</sup> Ravenshoe, p.449



- 23 Ravenshoe, p.450
- 24 Henry Kingsley, Austin Elliot 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1863), Vol.1, p.281
- 25 Austin Elliot, vol.2, p.20
- 26 Henry Kingsley, Silcote of Silcotes, 3 vols (London: Macmillan,1867), Vol.2, p.66
- 27 Henry Kingsley, Number Seventeen 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus,1875), Vol.1, p.24
- 28 Henry Kingsley, Stretton 3 vols (London: Tinsley Bros, 1869), Vol.1, p.27
- 29 Ellis, p.225
- 30 Ellis, p.214
- 31 Ellis, p.215
- 32 Ellis, p.226
- 33 Valentin, Vol.2, p.197
- 34 Valentin, Vol.2, p.235
- 35 Penelope Holland, 'A Few More Words on Convents and on English Girls', Macmillan's Magazine 19, (March 1869), p.535
- 36 This attitude is discussed in some detail in Penelope Holland, 'Two Girls of the Period', Macmillan's Magazine 19, (February 1869), pp.323-331
- 37 Henry Kingsley, Mademoiselle Mathilde 3 vols (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1868), Vol.1, p.10
- 38 Mademoiselle Mathilde, Vol.2, p.65
- 39 Mademoiselle Mathilde, Vol.2, p.65
- 40 Mademoiselle Mathilde, Vol.3, p.61
- 41 A French convent decamping wholesale to England during the French Revolution also features in Charlotte M Yonge's The Young Stepmother (1861).
- 42 Two unmarried women live together within a walled garden in Kingsley's short story 'Hornby Mills Garden' (1872).
- 43 The majority of paintings discussed by Susan Caseras have walled garden settings in 'Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices', Victorian Studies, 24, pp.157-184
- 44 Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men (London: Junction Books, 1980), p.124 refers to them as being like 'Protestant nuns', and notes that much of their fame stemmed from Romantic conceptions of their co-existence as harmonious and pure.
- 45 Kingsley's short story 'Why Lady Hornbury's Ball was Postponed' (1872) includes a Marchioness who enters a convent after her divorce.

- <sup>46</sup> Henry Kingsley, The Grange Garden: A Romance, 3 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1876), Vol.1, p.221
- <sup>47</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.1, p.223
- <sup>48</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.1, p.225
- <sup>49</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.2, p.16
- <sup>50</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.2, p.30
- <sup>51</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.1, p.203
- <sup>52</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.3, p.23
- <sup>53</sup> The Grange Garden, vol.3, p.35
- <sup>54</sup> The Daily Review, 5 November 1869, p.6, col.4
- <sup>55</sup> The Daily Review, 5 April 1870, p.2, col.1
- <sup>56</sup> The Daily Review, 9 April 1870, p.2, col.1
- <sup>57</sup> The Daily Review, 10 May 1870, p.2, col.1
- <sup>58</sup> The Daily Review, 15 November 1869, p.5, col.5
- <sup>59</sup> The Daily Review, 11 January 1870, p.7, col.3
- <sup>60</sup> The Daily Review, 14 April 1870, p.3, col.2
- <sup>61</sup> The Daily Review, 15 April 1870, p.3, col.2
- <sup>62</sup> The Daily Review, 16 April 1870, p.2, col.1
- <sup>63</sup> The Daily Review, 17 March 1870, p.5, col.3
- <sup>64</sup> The Daily Review, 4 May 1870, p.5, col.6
- <sup>65</sup> Although there is no such place as 'Bedlam's End' at Baddesley Clinton in Warwickshire, there is a fifteenth-century moated manor house which was a refuge for Roman Catholic priests in the 1590s, and has three priest holes. There is also a convent of Poor Clares in the village. (I am grateful to my mother, Mrs Jill Natton, for this information). It would be interesting to know how far the Daily Review story was based on truth.
- <sup>66</sup> The Daily Review, 21 January 1870, p.2, col.1
- <sup>67</sup> The Daily Review, 27 April 1870, p.2, col.3
- <sup>68</sup> See, Thomas Laycock, Mind and Brain: or, The Correlations of Consciousness and Organisation: Systematically Investigated and Applied to Philosophy, Mental Science and Practice 2nd edn. 2 vols. (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co, 1860), ii. 481-8, 490, in Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, eds, Embodied Selves (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), pp.176-179.
- <sup>69</sup> The Daily Review, 16 April 1870, Editorial, p.2, col.1



- 70 The Daily Review, 11 April 1870, p.2, col.3
- 71 Silcote of Silcotes, vol.1, p.225
- 72 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh [1854] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.40
- 73 Aurora Leigh, p.45
- 74 The Daily Review, 9 April 1870, p.2, col.2
- 75 The Daily Review, 15 April 1870, p.2, col.3
- 76 The Daily Review, 21 January 1870, p.2, col.1

## Conclusion

Not all Victorians were as confident about women's abilities as Henry Kingsley. To many it seemed that, in confounding contemporary expectations of women's behaviour, Sisterhoods were rebelling against natural and higher authorities both masculine and divine. To reject the safety offered by the male-led family unit and put themselves under the authority of a woman in order to not only associate with, but serve, the poorest classes of society, the sick, and the sinful, was to many not just perverse, but verging on the blasphemous. They were therefore not only transgressing boundaries of the family, but also of morality and religion.

Perhaps the most common accusation against Sisterhoods was that they alienated women from their families by vows of obedience to their community and to its leader, and that Mothers Superior lured impressionable young ladies away from their families, and from their domestic duties. The reality, as Dinah Mulock Craik noted and Dora Pattison's community in Middlesborough demonstrated, was that not all Sisterhoods took vows, and that Sisters saw their families for holidays and in times of need. In addition, most Sisters were in their late twenties or early thirties and joined communities when they were considered past marriageable age, or when they might feasibly have married and left home anyway.

Opponents such as Elizabeth Whately considered it morally wrong that ladies of good birth and breeding should willingly expose themselves to disease and vice, and should have to carry out heavy manual work of the sort usually performed by servants. It was a serious accusation against Mothers Superior, in Whately's opinion, that they should allow Sisters to ally themselves with lower-class women in this way: by adopting their work habits they might also assimilate lower standards of behaviour generally. Also, Mothers Superior, who were assumed to stand *in loco parentis* deliberately sent their 'daughters' to do unsuitable work often with the most degraded people. The fear was not just of physical infection, but that tainted morality might communicate itself and corrupt. Women who should be protected physically and morally by their male relatives were escaping into a dangerous, woman-controlled hinterland and laying themselves open to temptation and abuse.

Many at the opposite end of the theological spectrum saw Anglo-Catholicism simply as a stage to conversion to Roman Catholicism and Sisterhoods as a 'base counterfeit' of



convents. Much of the imagery of Sisterhoods, particularly in ultra-Protestant fiction, was derived from anti-Roman Catholic and anti-convent propaganda which tended to favour speculation of a sadistic and sexual nature in varying degrees of explicitness. This kind of imagery lodged itself in the public consciousness and provoked the huge wave of publicity surrounding the Saurin v. Starr trial which, having disproved that anything improper had happened in Hull, itself gave rise to further accusations. These centred principally around the fact that the trial had proved, in some people's eyes, that women were incapable of living harmoniously together, and that ladies, when given positions of authority over others became not merely unladylike, but tyrannical in their assumptions of power.

Although the first Sisterhood was conceived of and planned by men, their influence on the movement diminished as it gathered strength. As Sisterhoods were not officially recognised by the Church of England no diocesan sanction was needed for their formation, so that women of determination and means, such as Sister Dora's Superior, Mother Theresa Newcomen, could start a community where they saw there was need for it. It was also possible, as Emily Ayckbowm of the Sisters of the Church proved, to dispense with the help of men, and influential men at that, altogether. In addition to taking over a male idea and making it peculiarly their own, Sisterhoods also succeeded where the first male communities, for example Elton and Littlemore in the 1840s, quickly foundered and collapsed. When male communities did make a more positive start towards the close of the century, they were predominately contemplative, and the first successful male community, in terms of longevity - Father Ignatius's Benedictines in Norwich in the 1860s - was so dominated by its founder's idiosyncrasies as to become an object of ridicule.

Although some contemplative women's communities existed by the end of the century, Sisterhoods were founded on the ethos of service both to God and to their fellow beings by practical means. Because Sisters tended to be from the upper-middle and middle-classes, related to the decision-makers who ran the country, it is possible that their experiences, reported back to their influential relatives, had some effect on nineteenth-century social reform. Both Gladstone and his wife, for example, were involved with the Sisterhood movement: Gladstone was one of the founders of the first community at Park Village West, and Mrs Gladstone was a supporter of the Newport Refuge and St Margaret's, East Grinstead.



The work of Sisterhoods was initially simply an extension of 'good works', of acts of charity carried out within the domestic circle or with family sanction, but they slowly extended the boundaries of what was acceptable, arguably forcing some dissolution of class boundaries, and almost certainly increasing class awareness. By acting outside the family they not only took traditional women's activities, such as nursing and teaching, and formalized and professionalized them, making them into a means of female self-support. They also engaged with hitherto exclusively male professions such as social administration and the medical authorities. It is possible that opponents to the movement were disturbed by a realization that Sisterhoods were facilitating a slow erosion of class and gender barriers. By moving outside the domestic sphere Sisters were also countering traditional ideas of women's physiology and psychology, particularly those relating to unmarried women and the attitudes these engendered.

It is debatable how far, if at all, Sisterhoods considered themselves part of the nineteenth-century feminist movement. The official High Church line would have been not at all, as Anglo-Catholicism considered spiritual obedience and duty to a male-led clergy to be of the utmost importance. Susan Mumm has shown, however, that a portion of women who joined communities seemed to do so for the work they offered rather than for the spiritual benefits. Certainly it is possible to see Sisterhoods as feeding into, and responding to, contemporary feminism without actually engaging with it, by questioning contemporary opinions on suitable activities for women, by undertaking the type of work that they did, and by continuing with, and extending that work regardless of adverse reactions to it.

Penelope Holland, in asking for more secular work opportunities of the kind offered by Sisterhoods, complained that the best young women were being drawn to them, thereby depriving the world at large of a valuable asset. Serious young women, like Holland's Belgravian young lady, who having observed and read about social conditions and wanting to be of use, were attracted by the activities of Sisterhoods, and not dismayed by the unpleasantness of the conditions in which they might have to live and work: 'It is now considered vulgar for a girl to be afraid of compromising her dignity by doing anything which requires doing'. The suggestion was that Sisterhoods were ahead of the secular world in realising and exploiting women's potential.

The gradual influence of Sisterhoods on secular freedom for women is reflected, discreetly, in the works of Charlotte Yonge. As she began to include Sisterhoods more



frequently in her fiction she increasingly mentions more and more activities as suitable for young ladies so that by Magnum Bonum (1879) there is a lady doctor, albeit trained abroad, and a law-copier. The Long Vacation (1895) and Modern Broods (1900) both include girls going to college or university as a matter of course. Even as early as The Pillars of the House (1873), Wilmet's independence in Egypt and Robina's determination to work as a governess so that she can contribute to setting up a household when she is married reflect the small but important freedoms achieved by women and are reflected by the prominence given to St Faith's in the narrative.

As editor of The Monthly Packet Yonge also increased the articles devoted either to the work of Sisterhoods, or to their founding and structure. It would seem that the teaching of Anglo-Catholicism on duty and discipline and male-led authority were gently subverted over the latter part of the nineteenth century, even by one of its most faithful adherents.

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