

A tale of two schools: educating Catholic female deaf children in Ireland, 1846–1946

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This paper discusses the contributions of the Dominican Sisters and Sisters of Mercy in running schools for female deaf children in Ireland during the period 1846 to 1946. The schools were established as part of an attempt to educate

Catholics in the Catholic faith and provide literacy to female deaf children. In assuming the challenge of educating deaf girls, the sisters adopted a method of teaching and learning through signed language of which they had little prior knowledge. While the history of the schools is contextualised as a central narrative of this paper, the religious orders’ attempt to educate deaf children effectively is examined in the context of teacher role models and sign language pedagogy. This paper argues that the work of the Mercy and Dominican sisters should be recognised for its contribution to the education of female deaf children, whose needs would otherwise have been neglected.

Keywords: female deaf children; Irish Catholic schools for deaf children; deaf education history; sign language; Catholic religious women

Introduction

In 1816, the ‘First Report of the National Institution for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor in Ireland’ indicated that, with 25 deaf educational institutions already established in other countries throughout Europe, Ireland was failing to address the educational needs of the deaf population in the country.¹The report stated that Irish deaf

¹ John Edward Caldwell, ‘Extracts from the First Report of the National Institution for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor in Ireland’, *Christian Herald and Seaman’s Magazine* 5, May 18, 1816, 467–72; Rachel Pollard, *The Avenue: A History of the Claremont Institute* (Dublin: Denzil Press, 2006). The report

people were ‘unfortunate individuals among the lower classes’, isolated and cut off from social intercourse with members of society.² Although the report gives some indication of the social conditions of deaf people, it is impossible to state the true extent of illiteracy and poverty affecting them.³ However, the majority who experienced significant poverty were generally understood to be poorly educated during the early nineteenth century.⁴ Prior to the establishment of the Claremont Institute, deaf children were schooled through asylums, penitentiaries and industrial schools while those from wealthy families attended boarding schools in Britain.⁵ Historically, the Catholic Church believed deaf people could not access the sacrament of the church unless they were literate.⁶ Nevertheless, the 1816 Report offered some hope for the future, claiming deaf children could be educated through a signed language. The success of the philanthropic educator, Abbé Charles de l’Epée (1712–1789) was utilised as a case in point. When l’Epée established the world’s first educational institution for deaf children in Paris in 1762, he showed how deaf children could be taught using French Sign Language (LSF).⁷ He developed a system of teaching involving deaf teachers including Lauren Clerc who later helped found the first school for deaf children in the United States.⁸ Pierre-François Jamet (1762–1845), founder of Le Bon Sauveur School in Caen in 1816,

published by the Protestant-run National Institution for the Deaf and Dumb Children indicated the school was founded by a Protestant physician Dr Charles Orpen. Otherwise known as the Claremont Institute, the school was located in Claremont in Glasnevin, Dublin. It opened in 1816 with an initial enrolment of eight children. In 1840, 112 pupils had enrolled in the school. From the 1860s onwards, enrolment figures dropped to 27 in 1891. Claremont remained in operation until 1978 when it closed permanently.

² Ibid., 438.

³ Patrick McDonnell, *Disability and Society: Ideological and Historical Dimensions* (Dublin: Blackhall Press, 2007). According to Patrick McDonnell, deaf people were regarded as people with limited legal capacity and ineligible for positions of authority.

⁴ McDonnell, *Disability and Society*.

⁵ Edward Crean, *Breaking the Silence: The Education of the Deaf in Ireland 1816–1996* (Dublin: Irish Deaf Society, 1997); Pollard, *The Avenue: A History of the Claremont Institute*.

⁶ M. A. Winzer, ‘Disability and Society before the Eighteenth Century: Dread and Despair’, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. L. J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 75–109.

⁷ Par M. K. Morel, *Biographique sur L’Abbe de L’Epee*, trans. Patrick W. Seamans (Doncaster: British Deaf History Society, 1997).

⁸ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

studied l'Épée's teaching method following a visit to Paris. In 1846, the Dominican Sisters⁹ followed Jamet's example and introduced the Paris school model at St Mary's School for Deaf and Dumb Females in Cabra, Dublin. Forty-six years later, in 1892, the Sisters of Mercy¹⁰ received support from Cabra to operate a similar system at St Joseph's Institute for Deaf and Dumb Females in Rochfortbridge, County Westmeath. While St Mary's has the clearest continuity of existence stretching for over 150 years to the present day, St Joseph's Institute lasted for almost 48 years until it closed in 1940 due to low funds and insufficient enrolment numbers.¹¹

This paper focuses on the emergence of two Catholic schools for deaf girls in Cabra and Rochfortbridge where the unique contribution of the Mercy and Dominican sisters¹² was the adoption of l'Épée's model of education and the procurement of deaf teachers. The relationship between the two schools that facilitated the engagement of deaf teachers has

⁹ The Dominican Order belonged to an old order founded in 1206 by Saint Dominic. The Order largely focused on prayer and education for middle- and upper-class girls. It was first established in Galway in the mid-sixteenth century. Later the Dominican Sisters founded convents and boarding schools in Dublin, first at Channel Row in 1717, at Cabra in 1819 and then at Sion Hill in 1836. Their mission was to provide a basic education for poor Catholic females and to teach them literacy to help them become more productive members of society. See Jenny Collins, 'They came with a Purpose: Educational Journeys of Nineteenth-century Irish Dominican Sister Teachers', *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* 44, no. 1 (2014): 44–63.

¹⁰ The Sisters of Mercy, founded by Catherine McAuley (1778–1841) on December 12, 1831, had as their mission to provide a programme of education, health care and social services to poor girls and women. Born in Stormanstown House in Dublin in 1778, Catherine McAuley inherited a family background of social involvement with needy people. Following the death of her parents she lived, for a period of time, with relatives until her adoption by a retired wealthy couple, Mr and Mrs Callaghan. In 1822, Catherine inherited the Callaghan fortune of £25,000 and opened a refuge for homeless unemployed girls and domestic servants considered to be in moral danger. Nine years later she founded the Sisters of Mercy. In 1847 Catherine enshrined the need for a sense of unity in her spiritual community. The Sisters worked in workhouses, the slums, the House of Mercy, the schools, the hospitals and prisons. See Stephanie Burley, 'Engagement with Empires: Irish Catholic Female Religious Teachers in Colonial South Australia 1868–1901', *Irish Educational Studies* 31, no. 2 (2011): 175–90.

¹¹ Danny Dunne, *To Serve Them with Gladness: Celebrating One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Sisters of Mercy, Rochfortbridge* (Rochfortbridge: St Joseph's Secondary School Commemorative Committee, 2012).

¹² In this article the terms 'nun' and 'sister' are used interchangeably to refer to women religious who took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and whose lives were characterised by individual and communal prayer. It is worth noting that the distinction between the two terms lie in the vows taken by women religious: for example, 'nuns' took solemn vows while 'sisters' took simple vows. See Deirdre Raftery, 'Rebels with a Cause: Obedience, Resistance and Convent Life, 1800–1940', *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* 42, no. 6 (2013): 1–16; Deirdre Raftery, 'The "Mission" of Nuns in Female Education in Ireland, c.1850–1950', *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 48, no. 2 (2011): 299–313.

historically been undocumented in deaf education research. This is an area of study that is significant given that it has not been sufficiently addressed in deaf education literature. Although the works of Edward Crean and Nicholas Griffey have greatly illuminated our understanding of the history of deaf education, much of the authors' account is focused on a discussion about policy development pertaining to the period between 1946 and 1996.¹³ Carmen M. Mangion noted how a study of the role of religious women in educating deaf children would benefit from an examination of literature on the history of women religious in educating Catholic children.¹⁴ The article therefore positions itself within scholarship on the history of women religious and the history of education in Ireland. For example, Stephanie Burley's study of the history of the Dominican and Mercy sisters provides insight into the contribution of women religious to the development of female children's religious and cultural identities and the nurturing of gender and class attitudes.¹⁵ Both Raftery and Parke and Raftery and Nowlan-Roebuck inform this paper where the authors discuss the religious rivalry permeating the Irish national education system during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ The authors' work clearly enlightens this paper with an understanding of how the threat of proselytism gave the Catholic Church the impetus to provide support for women religious teachers in educating Catholic children.¹⁷ Jenny Collins' study of Dominican Sisters Teachers' contribution to developing education systems in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa has vastly improved our understanding of the Dominican Orders' educational and cultural ideals.¹⁸ Much like the work of Stephanie Burley, the author offers

¹³ Crean, *Breaking the Silence*; Nicholas Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1994). Griffey's work is mainly autobiographical with minimal use of primary sources.

¹⁴ Carmen M. Mangion, "'The Business of Life': Educating Catholic Deaf Children in Late Nineteenth-century England", *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* 41, no. 5 (2012): 575–94.

¹⁵ Collins, 'They came with a Purpose'.

¹⁶ Deirdre Raftery and Susan M. Parkes, *Female Education in Ireland, 1700–1900: Minerva or Madonna* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002). Deirdre Raftery and Catherine Nowlan-Roebuck, 'Convent Schools and National Education in Nineteenth Century Ireland: Negotiating a Place within a Non-denominational System', *History of Education* 36, no. 3 (2007): 353–62.

¹⁷ See Raftery, 'The "Mission" of Nuns in Female Education in Ireland, c.1850–1950'.

¹⁸ Collins, 'They came with a Purpose'.

an international perspective to the history of women religious. While the work of John Coolahan enhances our understanding of the history of the Irish education system, it does not deal directly with the impact of women religious teachers on the educational lives of Catholic female children.¹⁹ This study not only enriches Coolahan's scholarly interest in Irish education, but also adds to the research by Raftery and Parke on the history of women religious by extending the research on the work of the Dominican and Mercy sisters. Furthermore, it complements Carmen M. Mangion's study of the history of St John's Catholic school for deaf children in Britain by expanding the reader's understanding of deaf education history.

This article contributes an original study to the emergent historiography of Irish education history, history of women religious and deaf education history by using letters, commissioned reports, state correspondences, government papers, journals, newspapers, personal and institutional records, and census returns to examine a sample of the evolution of Catholic schools for deaf girls during the period between 1846 and 1946. The primary impetus rested on a curiosity to understand why the schools opened and what happened in the intervening years. The thrust was to see how the institutions thrived, developed and expanded. Of particular interest was a desire to understand how the religious women operated the schools with little prior knowledge of a signed language and later managed to adapt to new educational ideas. The aim was to try and understand the ethos, values and priorities that informed pedagogical practices. International trends in the history of education are studied in the context of how and why the Dominican and Mercy sisters successfully managed to develop appropriate teaching and learning models for their respective schools.

¹⁹ John Coolahan, *Irish Education; Its History and Structure* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981).

Early developments and the founding of the Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb

Before examining the evolution of Catholic schools for female deaf children, it is necessary to present an overview of early developments in deaf education in Ireland. This is important from the point of view of establishing an understanding of how religious rivalry provided the catalyst for founding Catholic schools for deaf children. A natural starting point is the record of correspondences that took place in 1843 between the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Edward Eliot, and the Governor of the Claremont Institute.²⁰ The Claremont Institute had opened with a small enrolment of students, some of whom were Catholics and, in 1830, the number of Catholic pupils increased.²¹ It was argued that Claremont was ‘strictly and exclusively Protestant; and Catholic parents who sent their children for instruction in this establishment were fully aware that those children in gaining knowledge, abandoned faith.... The system rendered Claremont unpopular’.²²

In 1843, these statistics drew the attention of Eliot who corresponded with the Governor of the Claremont Institute.²³ Eliot feared that the Roman Catholic Church might object to a clause in the Poor Law Amendment Bill that gave powers to the Board of Guardians to send deaf children to the Claremont Institution. On 29 July 1843, in an effort to defuse tension, he wrote to the Governor asking him to confirm that arrangements were in place at Claremont to

²⁰ House of Commons, Copy of any correspondence between the Chief Secretary for Ireland and the Governor of the National Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor in Ireland, relative to any changes proposed in the principles and forms of education, 1843, <http://www.dippam.com/eppi/documents/10956/download> (accessed May 23, 2013).

²¹ Claremont Institute, 14th Report (1830), 16.

²² ‘Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, Twelfth Annual Report, 1858’, *Irish Quarterly Review* viii (Dublin: W.B. Kelly, 1858): 1305. Several other schools for deaf children were established in the country at the time, which include: a day-school for deaf children opened in Cork by Dr Patrick Keogh (1822–1848); the Dorset Institution in Dublin (1826–1866); the Ulster Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb in Belfast (1831–); school founded in Kilrea Co Londonderry (1834–1835); Miss Wright’s school in Moneymore, County Londonderry (1842–1863); and the Strabane Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in County Tyrone (1846–1871). Apart from Dr Keogh’s school, these schools were run by Protestants.

²³ House of Commons, 1843.

provide education into the Catholic faith.²⁴ Claremont replied on the same date to the Chief Secretary and noted the school was not at liberty to make alterations to the curriculum while the National Board of Guardians paid for the education of deaf children attending the institution. Furthermore, Claremont was intent on continuing operations according to the principles of the Holy Scriptures, the way it had done for 27 years since the school was founded. The Governor maintained that Catholic children were admitted to the school and parents made no objection to its religious ethos.²⁵ The availability of instruction in the Protestant faith to Catholic children at Claremont enraged Father Thomas McNamara (1801–1893), a Vincentian priest working in the parish of Phibsboro in Dublin.²⁶ McNamara's interest in the welfare of deaf children was first aroused in 1840 following a visit to Le Bon Sauveur School where he experienced the way schooling was provided for deaf children. On his return to Ireland, he believed a similar institution should be founded in the country. When called upon to explain to the Archbishop and other Roman Catholic clergies his plans for a new school, McNamara noted in his correspondence an incident that occurred outside his church in Phibsboro, Dublin. In 1844, he witnessed a group of children from the Claremont Institute walking the street led by a teacher who had stopped outside his church and made a gesture to the children that anyone entering the church was doomed to hell.²⁷ The incident, while seemingly trivial in itself, was nevertheless significant since it fuelled in McNamara a desire to protect Catholic deaf children from what he believed were proselytising influences. McNamara sought help from Catholic clergies to found a Catholic school.²⁸ On 22 December 1845, he was supported by Monsignor Yore in progressing the establishment of the Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, a 26-man committee comprising Catholic Church leaders

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Irish Quarterly Review* VII, no. XXXII (January 1859) (Dublin: W.B. Kelly, 1859).

²⁷ Thomas McNamara, *Letters to the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, in Vindication of a Dissertation, Entitled Claims of the Uninstructed Deaf-Mute to be admitted to the Sacraments* (Dublin: Brown & Nolan, 1879), 29–30.

²⁸ Ibid.

and lay people. McNamara was subsequently appointed secretary of the new group with overall planning responsibility.²⁹

The Catholic Institute project was advertised in the leading journals of the time to publicise the venture, encompassing its main objective: to raise funds to establish a Catholic school.³⁰ Over time it proved difficult to obtain adequate funds as work was hampered by the disastrous effects of the famine affecting the country. The committee eventually managed to raise sufficient funds with an initial donation of £100 and contributions received from members of the public. Given the difficulties endured by the general Irish population at the time, it is noteworthy, and perhaps remarkable, that the Catholic Institute managed to raise £1509 19s 3d in its first year of existence.³¹ Around this time, the Cabra Dominicans Sisters were under the spiritual direction of the Vincentians and McNamara would have been aware that the sisters had given years of service to the running of the ‘poor schools’.³² They had been long established in Cabra (since 1819) and were part of the government run school system, which gave them freedom to choose the curriculum and have the schools conducted according to the religious ethos and practices of the Catholic Church. When McNamara called on them for support, their vocation to educate the poor and disadvantaged meant they were in a position to respond favourably.³³

The French connection

²⁹ Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, First Annual Report (January 1847), 21 (hereafter: Cabra Report). McNamara, Letters to the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, in Vindication of a Dissertation, Entitled Claims of the Uninstructed Deaf-Mute to be admitted to the Sacraments, 30.

³⁰ Cabra 1st Report, 21; Nation, November 28, 1846, 2.

³¹ By 1851 a total of £2511 12s 3d was raised. Cabra 5th Report, 1851, 37.

³² Maire Kealy, Dominican Education in Ireland, 1820–1930 (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

³³ Kealy, Dominican Education in Ireland, 1820–1930. In 1856, McNamara secured the services of the Christian Brothers to run a Catholic school for male deaf children located within close proximity to St Mary’s.

In early January 1846, McNamara and Yore informed Mother Columba Maher, the Dominican convent Prioress, of the committee's development plans. When the proposal was accepted, provisional accommodation was provided in the convent building until more extensive premises were established.³⁴ On 11 January 1846, two deaf girls, Agnes Beedem and Mary Ann Doherty, aged eight and nine years respectively, were admitted and Sr Vincent Martin and Sr Magdalene O'Farrell were engaged to teach them. McNamara was aware that a system for teaching the girls had to be developed for teachers with no previous experience in teaching deaf children.³⁵ He thought it necessary to seek support from Le Bon Sauveur in Caen.³⁶ McNamara's decision to turn to France instead of Claremont or the Protestant-owned Braidwood Academy in Britain might have been influenced by his views on Protestant education institutions. Nevertheless he commissioned the Dominican Sister Teachers and their pupils to spend six months in Caen learning the teaching methods at Le Bon Sauveur School.³⁷ Part of the Irish girls' mission was to help teach sign language to other pupils at St Mary's after the school opened in September 1847. Before they journeyed to France, Abbé Furon stated in a letter to McNamara that the girls would have little difficulty interacting with 50 deaf children at Le Bon Sauveur.³⁸ Towards the end of January 1846, the four-strong Irish contingent, chaperoned by the Revd James Lynch, travelled to France. On 23 August 1846, Furon accompanied the sisters and two girls on their return to Ireland to provide support in instructing deaf children. The sisters had in their possession a dictionary containing

³⁴ Nation, November 28, 1846.

³⁵ Kealy, *Dominican Education in Ireland, 1820–1930*.

³⁶ McNamara, *Letters to the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, in Vindication of a Dissertation, Entitled Claims of the Uninstructed Deaf-Mute to be admitted to the Sacraments*; John Burke, *Notes for Teachers* (Dublin: Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, 1856).

³⁷ Given his grievances with Protestant schools in Ireland, McNamara may have decided to go to France instead of Britain to avoid a Protestant connection with British schools. McNamara's previous link with Le Bon Sauveur may also have influenced his decision.

³⁸ Letter from Abbe Furon at Le Bon Sauveur addressed to members of the Catholic Institute Committee, December 31, 1845. *Irish Quarterly* (1858): 1306.

methodical French signs devised by Abbé Sicard along with some books on teaching French.³⁹

St Mary's Institute for Deaf and Dumb Females

St Mary's Institute for Deaf and Dumb Females was officially opened in September 1846 with 15 girls admitted to a room in the convent building that was given the title 'The Cottage'.⁴⁰ Father John Burke noted the Dominican sisters were encountering problems using the French method:

Some of the difficulties in teaching language to the deaf may seem complicated but they will appear as such, only to those who do not have an experimental knowledge of the brevity of sign language or do not know to what extent it can be simplified or do not realise that language of signs is a language of ideas.⁴¹

Using his knowledge of French, Burke managed to adapt the French methodical signing system to a system suited to teach English literacy.⁴² His teaching approach is described in the following way:

We begin by showing our new pupils representations of domestic animals, birds, and common objects, which usually surround them and with which they have already come in contact. As soon as we see that they recognise those representations we introduce them to the sign for each. They quickly learn that the sign stands for the real object as well as the pictorial representation. Next they learn that there is a name for that sign and thus they begin to spell, using the manual alphabet. We allow them to sketch out the surrounding objects and trace the resemblance between the object and its representation. Thus we engage their interest, excite their attention, and save them from the child's first torment, learning the ABC.⁴³

This extract affords an insight into the importance of using sign language for teaching literacy. The question of how the girls acquired sign language to facilitate their learning needs to be asked but no evidence is available that would suggest they had contact with other deaf people prior to starting in St Mary's. Unfortunately no recorded evidence appears to have survived that would shed light on the activities of Agnes and Mary Ann when they journeyed to France.

³⁹ Methodical French signs are not French Sign language (LSF) but involves signs that follow French grammar.

⁴⁰ The title was later changed to St Mary's Deaf and Dumb Institute for Females.

⁴¹ Burke, Notes for Teachers.

⁴² Burke later became the school's chaplain with responsibility to support the sisters.

⁴³ Burke, Notes for Teachers.

However, they may have developed a means of communication among themselves and later learned French Sign Language (LSF) from interaction with peers at Le Bon Sauveur School.

In 1848, when a new wing in St Mary's, 'St Gabriels', was opened, the school accommodated 90 pupils. Over the next few years the number of pupils increased, going from 15 to 25 pupils in 1848 and to 50 pupils by 14 April 1851.⁴⁴ By the end of 1851 100 pupils were receiving instructions.⁴⁵ Between the years 1846 and 1859, The Catholic Institute committee operated a strict policy with regard to the age of pupils. Children between the ages of 8 and 12 were accepted in St Mary's provided they were without deficiency of intellect or some contagious diseases.⁴⁶ From 1859 onwards, exceptions were made for a number of 'older pupils' admitted from workhouses on referral from the Board of Guardians.⁴⁷ Many of those transferred out of workhouses were aged between 40 and 50 years. Financial dependence on the Board of Guardians probably induced the Catholic Institute to relax its rule and accept enrolment of older pupils.⁴⁸ Some pupils remained in school throughout the year while others returned to their families once a year during the summer months and the school paid for their travelling expenses.⁴⁹

While the school did not provide articulation lessons, literacy instructions in reading, writing and arithmetic were delivered through the 'single-handed alphabet, similar to that generally used on the Continent and in America'.⁵⁰ On 2 July 1850, during the Feats of the Visitation, a public examination was held in the school. The event was presided over by Archbishop of

⁴⁴ Cabra 1st Report, 1847.

⁴⁵ Ibid. By the end of 1871, a total of 461 pupils received instructions at St Mary's.

⁴⁶ Nation, November 28, 1846. Cabra 1st Report, 1847.

⁴⁷ Cabra 21st Report, 1865.

⁴⁸ Royal Commission Report, Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors, and Others, Thirty Volumes, Blind, Deaf and Dumb, February 21, 1889–August 30, 1889, Vol. xix, 1889.

⁴⁹ Royal Commission, Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors, and Others, Thirty Volumes, Blind, Deaf and Dumb.

⁵⁰ William R. Wilde, 'On the Physical, Moral, and Social Condition of the Deaf and Dumb' (1854), 17–21, <http://digital.ucd.ie/view/ivrla:47438> (accessed July 4, 2012).

Dublin Dr Murray⁵¹ and over 600 people observed pupils successfully responding to questions in sign language on ‘English grammar, arithmetic, geography, sacred history and the truths of Christian doctrine’.⁵²

With regard to teacher training, the Dominican sisters took the responsibility of placing pupils in employment by establishing, in 1854, a monitored system of pupil teacher training courses.⁵³ This was made possible because the school operated without state support and the government did not concern itself with teacher qualifications as a condition for teaching. Thus the Dominican Sisters had free reign in training a select number of pupils for teaching duties. Griffey notes how deaf teachers helped their pupils become immersed in sign language for the entire period of their schooling.⁵⁴

In 1863, a vocational department was established in St Mary’s to formalise training courses in dressmaking, spinning, dyeing, embroidery and tailoring.⁵⁵ The children received instructions in lace-making needlework, washing, knitting, cooking, crochet work and embroidery.⁵⁶ Up to four hours of basic training in cooking, laundry, dressmaking, sewing, knitting and needlework were provided.⁵⁷ The increase in the number of pupils then necessitated a new building and, in 1867, ‘The Workroom Wing’ was opened to provide training for pupils in which they developed skills for employment as milliners, spinners, lace-workers and embroiderers.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Cabra, 38th Report, 1886-7, 15.

⁵² Royal Commission, Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors, and Others, Thirty Volumes, Blind, Deaf and Dumb, 51–53.

⁵³ Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf*; Cabra 21st Report, 1865.

⁵⁴ Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf*.

⁵⁵ Cabra, 5th Report, 1851, 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁷ Royal Commission, 1889, 51–53; Cabra, 38th Report, 1886–1887, 15.

⁵⁸ Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf*, 17.

From 1878 onwards, a week-long retreat was held in St Mary's for past pupils. Deaf women travelled from all over the country and from as far as England and Scotland to attend the event.⁵⁹ The occasion allowed the women to maintain close ties with each other and form a vibrant sign-language community. Meanwhile, the integrationist movement gathering momentum in other countries during the midnineteenth century led to the organisation of a conference on the education of the deaf in Paris. The conference delegates helped organise the International Congress for the Education for the Deaf (ICED), which was held in Milan, Italy, in September 1880. The Congress decision to prohibit signed languages and replace these with spoken-language communication helped bring oralism to international prominence. Thomas Gallaudet, president of Gallaudet College in Washington, on his return to the United States following a visit to St Mary's, warned that removing sign language would have adverse consequences for deaf children's literacy education.⁶⁰ Although the Dominican sisters did not follow the lead taken by other schools in converting to oralism, the result of Congress had a slight effect on enrolment.⁶¹ During the 1890s, the number of admissions to St Mary's was lower than in previous years.⁶² Michael O'Dowd noted that, in 1896, a small number of pupils were transferred from Cabra to St John's Catholic School for the Deaf in Boston Spa, Yorkshire⁶³ to receive lessons in oralism. In 1899, on the instructions of parents wanting their

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Thomas Gallaudet, *The Silent Worker* 13, no. 10 (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Archives, 1901).

⁶¹ Oralism is defined as a politically infused educational ideology that promotes spoken language communication and prohibits the use of signed language. Maire Kealy noted how St Mary's did not provide oralism until 1947. The delay was due to the Dominican Sisters living cloistered lives, cut off from contact with the outside world with little information stemming from international developments.

⁶² Cabra 1st–52nd Reports, 1846 to 1914.

⁶³ St John's Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, founded in 1870, was a residential school for Catholic deaf children in Boston Spa, Yorkshire. The school, managed by Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, had a Vincentian connection and operated under a Vincentian Family ethos for almost a century and a half. The Daughters of Charity also opened St Vincent's School for the Deaf, a Catholic school located in Glasgow, Scotland. Father McNamara who had visited the city was influential in the founding of the school. His niece, Sister Teresa Farrell, helped procure a number of teachers from Cabra to teach a small number of deaf pupils enrolled in the school. These teachers introduced Irish Sign Language into the school. The connection between the two Catholic schools in Britain and Cabra was based on religion. See Diarmuid O'Farrell, 'Vincentian Ministry to the Deaf in Scotland', *Colloque: Journal of the Irish Province of the Congregation of the Mission*, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 121–128. See Mangion, "'The Business of Life': Educating Catholic Deaf Children in Late Nineteenth-century England'.

children to receive an education in oralism, the Dominican sisters transferred two girls from Cabra to the Claremont Institute.⁶⁴

St Joseph's Institute for Deaf and Dumb Females, 1892–1940

To the extent that the education of Catholic female deaf children is placed in a wider context, the earliest introduction to the history of St Joseph's Institute is the record of correspondences between Sr Stanislaus O'Neill, the Rochfortbridge Mercy convent superioress, and the Mullingar Board of Guardians. On 23 July 1892, three months after the death of Father McNamara, Sr Stanislaus outlined in a letter the purpose of the new school:

... to educate and maintain deaf and dumb children under the title of St. Joseph's Catholic Institution for Deaf and Dumb Children under the care of the Sisters of Mercy, Rochfortbridge. His Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. McNulty, more than a year ago, expressed a wish that our community would open such an institution with his approval and patronage. We already have some day pupils and are at present preparing to receive them and others as boarders on 27th September next. May I ask you on the part of the community to give us a helping hand in the establishment and furthermore.⁶⁵

Similar to Father McNamara's role with St Mary's, the Bishop of Meath, Dr Thomas McNulty, was central to the founding of St Joseph's Institute.⁶⁶ The question of why the bishop considered setting up a school in Rochfortbridge and, second, why for female and not male children might be explained by the general concern within the religious communities for the welfare of women.⁶⁷ First, the Mercy sisters were committed to training female children to develop skills that would help them become useful members of society.⁶⁸ As Rochfortbridge was under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Meath, the sisters were subject to the authority of the Bishop for this diocese. Furthermore, McNulty paid an annual visit to the school to ensure the sisters had adequate resources to teach children. As bishop, he reserved the right to

⁶⁴ Michael O'Dowd, 'The History of the Catholic Schools for the Deaf' (master's thesis, University College Dublin, Dublin, 1955), 221.

⁶⁵ Editorial: "Board of Guardian Meeting", *Westmeath Examiner*, July 23, 1892. Clear notes that bishops reserved the right to recommend changes and modifications in the convents under his jurisdiction. Cairríona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987).

⁶⁶ *Westmeath Examiner*, July 23, 1892.

⁶⁷ Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 113–14.

recommend changes in Mercy convents under his jurisdiction.⁶⁹ Second, unlike McNamara, McNulty's interest in deaf education had little to do with the threat of Protestant influences. Instead, he was concerned for the welfare of a female relative who was deaf.⁷⁰ Clear maintains that single women and female children were thought to be most likely to be exposed to the dangers of illiteracy, to experience unemployment, destitution, disease and incarceration, or to be committed to workhouses. It was probably for this reason that McNulty desired to found a school for female deaf children instead of male children. His friendship with wealthy Catholic landowner and benefactor, Richard Coffey, may have induced in him an idea about establishing such a school.⁷¹ Through his connection with the Coffey family, McNulty may have had contact with deaf people including Coffey's son, Richard, and Charlotte Kelly the family governess and former pupil of St Mary's.

In response to Sr Stanislaus's request for financial support,⁷² the Mullingar Board applied to the Local Government Board of Ireland for approval for the new school to receive pupils.⁷³ The meeting proposed some of the children from St Mary's in Cabra be enrolled at the Institute subject to the approval of the Local Government Board of Ireland. In a letter dated 26 August 1892, Mother Stanislaus confirmed the Mercy sisters were prepared to take in children from the union.⁷⁴ The Board subsequently approved payment of expenses to the sisters for the education and care of children.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Olive Curran, *History of the Diocese of Meath, 1860–1993*, 3 vols (Dublin: Criterion Press, 1995).

⁷⁰ Magdalene Claffey, *History of Meath Mercy 1836–1996* (Diocese of Meath: The Congregation of Sisters of Mercy, 1996), 25.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Coffey helped fund substantial development in the parish including the building of a Catholic Church which signalled the birth of the Catholic parish in the village. William Fielding, a Protestant businessman, donated a gift of land from which to build the church. Fielding's daughter, Eliza, sold her family home, which she inherited from her father after his death, to parish priest Father Robbins for use as a convent for the Mercy sisters.

⁷² *Westmeath Examiner*, July 23, 1892.

⁷³ *Westmeath Examiner*, August 26, 1892.

⁷⁴ *Westmeath Examiner*, September 3, 1892.

⁷⁵ *Westmeath Examiner*, August 26, 1892.

The Mercy sisters required funds to advance the official opening of their new school. A meeting of prominent Roman Catholic clergymen discussed plans for a charity event to take place on 19 November 1892 specifically for this purpose. McNulty donated £50 and a gold chalice to the Sisters at a charity mass the following week and total sum of £110 16s was raised from public collections at the church, which helped clear school debts within a year.⁷⁶ On 24 November 1892 St Joseph's Institute was opened, marking the convent as an important institution for the schooling of Catholic deaf girls. McNulty did not take any further part in the school, preferring instead to leave administration responsibilities in the hands of the Rochfortbridge parish priest, Father Fagan. Thus the endeavour to transfer more pupils from St Mary's to St Joseph's Institute began and was noted in the correspondences that took place between 28 November and 13 December 1892.⁷⁷ Correspondence exchanged between Catholic Institute secretary, Daniel O'Brien, Drogheda Board of Guardians and Mother Columba Maher in St Mary's mentioned that the newly appointed teacher at St Joseph's, Charlotte Kelly, was to collect Teresa Waters and Mary Jane McCabe from Dublin and accompany them to Rochfortbridge. On 28 November 1892, the Drogheda Board of Guardians instructed the secretary of the Catholic Institute to hand over the girls to Charlotte at Broadstone Station but, for some reason, Mary Jane's parents objected and sought to keep her at St Mary's. On 2 December 1892, Teresa Waters' father instructed the secretary to send his daughter to Rochfortbridge. Twelve days later, on 14 December, Charlotte collected the young girl at Broadstone Station and Teresa was subsequently enrolled in St Joseph's Institute. By early in the New Year, Charlotte was teaching a class of 30 girls.⁷⁸

The evidence regarding the activities of St Joseph's Institute during the period between 1892 and 1940 is scarce compared with St Mary's. This is because admission registers containing

⁷⁶ Freemans Journal, November 27, 1893.

⁷⁷ Dominican Convent Archives, Rathoath Road, Cabra, Dublin 7. Material not coded (accessed July 7, 2014).

⁷⁸ Dominican Convent Archives.

information on new pupils and details of dates of admission and county of origin are almost impossible to find when they are in private hands and not available for public viewing.⁷⁹ Mary Peckham Magray suggested the Mercy sisters had a custom of using spoken rather than the written word when discussing congregational matters with bishops and did not keep written records.⁸⁰ However, enough evidence survives to allow one to build up a sketchy picture – at least to the extent that researchers are reliant on sources from newspaper reports, journal articles, census returns and government reports.

The Mercy sisters, who first arrived at Rochfortbridge in 1862, inculcated in female children values of self-restraint, neatness and productiveness. While education as a means of gaining social progress was important, it was secondary in the sisters' view to the practice of the Catholic religion. Preparation for the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion was highly valued and energy was spent on teaching religion. In St Joseph's Institute, much of what passed for instruction was religious and the girls received literacy education through sign language. Reporting on school activities in 1906, a Westmeath Examiner reporter noted how pupils communicated with their teachers by 'means of objects, observance of motions of the lips and mouth [and] facial expression'. As the reporter observed, children were 'able to write questions or frame answers on a piece of paper, or a blackboard or a slate'.⁸¹ The comments need to be treated with some caution as the journalists may have suppressed information on sign language and what was important may not have been included.⁸² What was noted as important, however, was the provision of religious and industrial education

⁷⁹ Sister Evelyn Kenny, Sister of Mercy Congregation Archivist, email communication to author, June 16, 2014.

⁸⁰ Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁸¹ Westmeath Examiner, March 31, 1906.

⁸² According to a reporter, the 'manual system' was in operation at the school. *Freeman's Journal*, May 25, 1895. 'Manualism' refers to a system of instructions given in a signed language. Douglas Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

where the girls were trained to develop skills in lace-making, embroidery, dress-making and tailoring.⁸³

In 1896, a primary school for local children established in the convent in 1862 relocated to new premises in the village.⁸⁴ The rest of the vacated areas were subsequently used as a boarding school for deaf children. Construction work in the building was carried out for the purposes of providing extra classrooms, a dormitory, living quarters and a play area to accommodate an increasing number of pupils. The form and fabric of the building was transformed from a simple housing residence to an institutional Gothic-revival style architecture containing six square-shaped windows at the front.⁸⁵ It was constructed in concrete and stone with tiled roofs. Located within the village area, the building stood clearly visible to the community, which was highly unusual for a convent school at the time as many of these type of schools, including St Mary's, were usually concealed behind high walls, physically separating them from the surrounding community.⁸⁶ Consequently, St Joseph's Institute was in the public view and locals kept a watchful eye on the school.⁸⁷

It was on the recommendation of the Dominican sisters that Charlotte Kelly became St Joseph's first teacher.⁸⁸ Having been a pupil in Cabra and trained there, Charlotte was well placed to introduce the Cabra education model. She was a well-known figure the day she arrived in Rochfortbridge in the summer of 1892 having left her post as governess to Richard

⁸³ St Joseph's did not fall into the category of industrial schools that catered for youthful offenders, orphans, or those with no fixed abode. Dunne, *To Serve Them with Gladness*.

⁸⁴ Dunne, *To Serve Them with Gladness*.

⁸⁵ National Archives, Education 2/34 folio 184/185, <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=WM®no=15320011> (accessed March 22, 2014).

⁸⁶ Dunne, *To Serve Them with Gladness*; Crean, *Breaking the Silence: The Education of the Deaf in Ireland 1816–1996*; *Westmeath Examiner*, March 31, 1906; *Westmeath Examiner*, April 14, 1906.

⁸⁷ Dunne, *To Serve Them with Gladness*.

⁸⁸ Mother Columba Maher's letter to Father Geoghegan, President of Castleknock College concerning Ellen Cronin's allegations against the Dominican Sisters, September 6, 1901. Dominican Convent Archives (accessed July 7, 2014).

Coffey's family. While commissioned to teach a class of deaf girls, Charlotte taught the Mercy sisters sign language.⁸⁹ The sisters' willingness to employ a deaf teacher was crucial as it ensured that sign language would become a positive educational inheritance passed on to children. When Charlotte died in June 1898, at the age of 55 years,⁹⁰ the sisters maintained a tradition of sign-language teaching. Rochfortbridge parish priest, Father Fagan, began to arrange for the procurement of another deaf teacher. Evidence of the endeavour to employ deaf teachers can be found in the correspondences of Mother Columba Maher, Father Brady, chaplain at St Mary's, and Father Fagan. On 3 August 1898, Fagan wrote to Father Brady asking him to contact Julia Kenny, a deaf teacher working at St Mary's, to persuade her to visit Rochfortbridge. Julia was on holiday at home in Ballymahon, County Longford when Father Brady visited her and handed the letter from Rochfortbridge. According to Julia, the Mercy sisters assumed she had been interested in teaching at the Institute. The letter stated that Fagan was concerned about rumours suggesting the Dominican sisters had forced their teachers to sign a pledge to work at no other institution other than St Mary's. In his view, the pledge was made 'under coercion and without any liberty of refusal'.⁹¹ When Brady asked if the Dominican sisters had treated her well, Julia maintained they had been kind to her.

On 5 August, Julia sent a copy of Father Fagan's letter to Mother Columba Maher and stated she had no desire to work in Rochfortbridge and wished to remain in Cabra. She had declined on grounds of poor health. Subsequently Charlotte's position was taken by Mary Browne, a deaf teacher trained in St John's in Boston Spa. A short time later, Ellen Mary Cronin, a former pupil of St Mary's from Kanturk, County Cork, joined the teaching staff at St Joseph's Institute. When allegations that the Dominican sisters had put up resistance to

⁸⁹ A reporter noted that the sisters had learned sign language. *Freeman's Journal*, May 25, 1895.

⁹⁰ Mother Columba Maher's letter to Father Geoghegan, September 6, 1901. Dominican Convent Archives (accessed July 7, 2014).

⁹¹ Father Fagan's letter to Father Brady, Chaplain of St Mary's, August 3, 1898. Dominican Convent Archives (accessed July 7, 2014).

sending pupil-teachers to Rochfortbridge reached Cabra, Mother Columba Maher wrote to the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr William Walsh (1841–1921) on 29 November 1898. She was responding to the bishop’s request on behalf of St Joseph’s for advice on the procurement of teachers. Mother Maher explained that, while deaf teachers at St Mary’s had been informed of the vacancy at Rochfortbridge, they did not want to leave Cabra.⁹² She maintained the sisters had already set down their own principles underlying the agreement between the school and its teachers that three months’ notice was required of all teachers when they were either dismissed or had resigned and they were free to work in any other institution of their choosing.

In 1899, just under a year after she started teaching at St Joseph’s Institute, Ellen Cronin became embroiled in controversy over allegations she made against the Dominican sisters. Her accusations seemed serious enough to prompt correspondence between the nuns and Father Geoghean, President of Castleknock College and Revd D. Gaffney, Bishop of Meath. As part of her training, Cronin observed class in St Mary’s and, in the words of the Dominican sisters, later ‘expressed her disapproval of the method of instruction, its workings and its results, which she contrasted most unfavourably with the system carried on in the American institutions’.⁹³ In September 1899, Cronin paid another visit to Cabra and spent 10 days observing the daily life and work of the institution. While teaching at St Joseph’s, she received from the Catholic Institute a selection of school books published in educational institutions in the United States, Australia and Britain. On 24 October 1899, Cronin accused the Dominican sisters of being unsupportive towards the Rochfortbridge institution.⁹⁴ Her comments were swiftly repudiated by Mother Maher in a letter to Father Geoghean and

⁹² Mother Maher’s letter, November 29, 1898, Dominican Convent Archives (accessed July 7, 2014).

⁹³ Ibid. The writer was probably referring to any of the schools for deaf children founded in the United States.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Bishop Gaffney in which selected extracts of Cronin's letter were enclosed for their attention. Unfortunately the language of the extracts obscured the background to Cronin's dissatisfaction with the education system at St Mary's. Whatever the reasons for her complaints, Cronin's teaching career seemed to have been cut short as she remained at Rochfortbridge for five years until 1903 when she resigned from her teaching post.⁹⁵

The number of pupils enrolled in St Joseph's Institute can best be appreciated from an examination of the 1901 and 1911 Census of Ireland.⁹⁶ A comparative study of figures in St Mary's provides useful insight into the extent of growth of the two schools. In 1901, 25 pupils, including 18-year-old Teresa Waters, were housed in the school building containing 13 rooms. The children and their teachers occupied 10 rooms and the sisters inhabited three rooms.⁹⁷ These figures contrast markedly with enrolment figures at St Mary's. In Cabra, for example, a total of 239 pupils and 14 deaf teachers (including Julia Kenny) were on the roll. In 1908, the Irish Independent reported that 249 girls received instructions at St Mary's but, by 1911, this figure decreased to 170 and 12 deaf teachers were on the staff roll. By contrast, St Joseph's Institute had 32 pupils on the roll in the same year with 17 pupils under the age of 18 years. Interestingly, 1911 figures indicate no deaf teachers were employed at St Joseph's Institute, which seems quite remarkable given the policy on sign language. By all accounts, the increase in pupil enrolment provides a good measure of St Mary's growth as an educational institution when compared with figures pertaining to the Rochfortbridge institution.

Modern developments in Irish deaf education, 1900–1946

⁹⁵ According to the 1911 Census of Ireland, Ellen Cronin lived with her sister Mary Anne in Kanturk, County Cork.

⁹⁶ Census of Ireland 1901 & 1911 <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie> (accessed May 22, 2014).

⁹⁷ See <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai001266935/> (accessed May 22, 2014).

An examination of newspaper reports provides historians with a useful means of charting developments at Cabra and Rochfortbridge during the early twentieth century. Much has been reported about fundraising, school activities and requests for public support. In 1903, for example, the Westmeath Examiner reported on a public concert held at St Joseph's Institute where the Mercy sisters staged 'Little Golden Hair found in the Woods by the Queen of the Fairies'. The reporter noted children's performance in sign language: 'the dialogue was so well conveyed to the audience by signs'.⁹⁸ The event helped generate a small amount of funds but, by 1906, the Mercy sisters were struggling with low funds. The newspaper appealed to the public for donations to support the institution but with little success. This is probably a consequence of competition from other sources such as the Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb notices appearing in the Irish Independent and Westmeath Examiner urging parents to send their children to Cabra.⁹⁹

In 1908, an Irish Independent reporter profiled St Mary's as an excellent institution for providing opportunities for pupils to be placed in suitable employment.¹⁰⁰ The following year, in 1909, the newspaper noted St Mary's provided classes in 'lip reading, voice training, physical training ... cookery, arts and crafts and school lessons pointed to the fact that though deafness is a handicap it can be overcome, and that contrary to popular idea deaf children are not necessarily dumb'.¹⁰¹ The reporter praised the school for providing high-quality training to deaf girls who produced bridal wear that generated a good income. While their work was displayed at exhibitions, their skills were also showcased in the public domain. Similar to the girls at St Mary's, the Rochfortbridge girls produced garments for sale to people of all ages.

⁹⁸ Grand Musical Entertainments at Rochfortbridge', Westmeath Examiner, November 14, 1903, 5.

⁹⁹ Irish Independent, 1906; Westmeath Examiner, March 31, 1906.

¹⁰⁰ Irish Independent, December 27, 1908.

¹⁰¹ Irish Independent, June 24, 1909.

Throughout 1910, their work, which was advertised in the *Westmeath Examiner*, was given the title ‘the Rochfortbridge lace’ for their distinctive patterns.¹⁰²

Sr Nicholas Griffey, who had begun a teaching career at St Mary’s in the early 1940s, mentioned in her autobiographical memoir a letter the school received from Hugh Myddleton, a teacher of the deaf in a London school.¹⁰³ Myddleton, who visited St Mary’s in 1912, stated in the letter that ‘the language results are the finest I have seen and I have learned much from the methods. As a teacher of the deaf this is one of the most helpful days’.¹⁰⁴ During a visit to St Mary’s in 1896, an unnamed teacher from the Halifax School for the Deaf in Canada told the sisters he was ‘very much impressed with the work being done in the Institution’.¹⁰⁵ The comments from international educators reflect the strength of St Mary’s and the effectiveness of its education system.

While St Mary’s gradually grew in popularity, St Joseph’s struggled to keep afloat with low funds. On 30 June 1925, the *Westmeath Examiner* published a plea with the heading ‘Do not neglect the Afflicted’. The sisters wrote to all the councils for help in procuring more pupils but met with little success.¹⁰⁶ The gradual decline in enrolment figures and the difficulty in raising funds meant the school’s future was now uncertain. Dunne suggests parents no longer saw St Joseph’s as a viable option¹⁰⁷ and Griffey avows some parents sent their children to Boston Spa and St Vincent’s School for the Deaf in Glasgow. The availability of oral classes in St Mary’s during the 1930s may have contributed to the gradual decline of St Joseph’s as

¹⁰² The newspaper also mentioned that, in 1910, a fire broke out in one of the outhouses close to the school building where materials used to manufacture clothes were stored. While there is no evidence to indicate whether damage was costly to the sisters, the school was able to receive permission from the rural District Court to erect the paling around the building which was completed in 1912 at a cost of £10.

¹⁰³ Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ The Board of Guardians were abolished after the Irish Free State was established in 1923.

¹⁰⁷ Dunne, *To Serve Them with Gladness*.

an institution with Cabra becoming a more attractive option for parents. The Catholic Institute for the Deaf and Dumb reported the availability of speech classes for ‘all the children with any powers of speech [to] have an opportunity of further developing that power’.¹⁰⁸ A professionally trained oral teacher provided support for the Dominican sisters in using the oral system of teaching.¹⁰⁹

In 1933, Dr Ward, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, brought St Mary’s within the ambit of the Irish Public Hospitals Bill.¹¹⁰ The school received £80,000 in funds towards the cost of building ‘the Sweep Wing’, which was eventually opened in 1936. In her autobiographical memoir, Griffey reveals the background that led to the decision to introduce oralism at St Mary’s in 1946.¹¹¹ In 1939, she attended a three-year teacher training course at St Mary’s College of Education in Belfast. While there she met Sr Peter Flynn who would later become Prioress of St Mary’s. Griffey may have learned that oralism was provided in schools for deaf children in Britain. She would have developed a new awareness about the problems associated with hearing loss. When she returned to St Mary’s in 1942, Griffey discovered to her dismay that her pupils’ language patterns had deviated ‘considerably from normal English usage’.¹¹² Noting how they were without speech, she became concerned about the atmosphere of ‘silence’¹¹³ permeating the school:

[T]he children were wordless, unable to communicate amongst themselves and incapable of understanding explanations. The deaf child is totally trapped in a world of silence unless help is available. The intellect, no matter how superior, is literally locked.¹¹⁴

In 1945, following her appointment as principal of St Mary’s, Griffey attended a specialist training course at the Department of Audiology in Manchester University under the direction

¹⁰⁸ Cabra Report, 1936, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 29.

¹¹³ One may infer from her book title that the author was keen to replace ‘silence’ with the sound of speech.

¹¹⁴ Griffey, *From Silence to Speech; 50 Years with the Deaf*, 19.

of Lady Irene and Sir Alexander Ewing. By the time she returned to St Mary's in 1946, she was convinced oralism would help children 'develop language' through speech and lip-reading.¹¹⁵ In her view, parental desire for speech and lip-reading justified her decision to change the education system. She had been concerned about parents' general apathy towards sign language and, while she turned her attention towards developing a modern education system in St Mary's, the future of St Joseph's in Rochfortbridge was, by contrast, rather bleak. Despite their best efforts to raise funds and attract more pupils, the Mercy sisters were eventually forced to close the school doors for the last time in 1940.

Conclusion

This article provides a historical perspective of developments and expansion of St Mary's and St Joseph's Institute by drawing on some of the most crucial ideas, events and practices from primary sources. While St Mary's is not the only Catholic school established for female deaf children, it is one of the major institutions in the history of deaf education in Ireland. The school's presence has been widely recorded in deaf studies literature but, until now, the rise to prominence and subsequent decline of St Joseph's has largely been unrecorded in academic research. What has been recorded in this paper is a separate set of historical and demographic factors that has allowed these schools to take root, develop and become interlinked. While religious rivalry was the catalyst for the foundation of St Mary's, philanthropic concern led the establishment of St Joseph's.

The value of these institutions evolves around the provision of religious and literacy education and industrial training. While children received industrial training to learn a skill in a trade, the sisters also catered for older deaf people, providing them with training opportunities that were unavailable to them as children. The 1911 Census provides examples

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

of how deaf people effectively secured work as ‘servant, small farmer, servant, domestic and groom’. According to the Irish Independent, ‘between 2,000 and 3,000 deaf children have passed through the institution fitted to take their place in the world’.¹¹⁶ The report provides a detailed picture of how deaf girls progressed after school: ‘some take to dressmaking in their own homes, or knitting or crocheting or sprigging according to the industry in their own vicinity’.¹¹⁷ The girls seemed to have benefited in later life from learning these skills in Cabra and Rochfortbridge.

Another value relates to the availability of sign language. The readiness with which the religious women learned sign language and their willingness to engage deaf teachers demonstrates their level of adaptability in taking on new challenges, which, in turn, helped to improve educational opportunities for female deaf children. The Dominican sisters contributed to the development of St Mary’s and helped build a reputation that attracted the attention of international educators. The religious sisters also helped create a deaf community, especially where deaf people congregated in St Mary’s during a week-long religious retreat, which, as Griffey noted, helped them maintain contact with each other.

Conversely, living in institutions meant children had little choice but to remain separate from their families. Maria Luddy notes how children living in institutions were raised in a tradition of isolation and segregation with little contact from society.¹¹⁸ Female deaf children rarely had opportunity to experience the literary culture of society. One wonders how the girls adjusted to life with their families after completing their schooling. Perhaps communication was an issue for parents who wanted speech classes for their children. As stated elsewhere,

¹¹⁶ Irish Independent, June 17, 1946.

¹¹⁷ Irish Independent, June 24, 1909.

¹¹⁸ Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52.

they became more involved in their children's education at a time when the Dominican Sisters considered the idea of introducing oralism at St Mary's. It could therefore be argued that both parental pressure and funding issues contributed to a gradual shift in political ideology in deaf education.

It seems the daily lives of teachers and pupils at St Mary's were affected by international trends in deaf education during the 1930s and 1940s but the extent of this influence on St Joseph's Institute is less well understood. It is very difficult to translate national statistics into the day-to-day realities of this institution because only limited information is available. Very little is known about the real impact of funding, parental decisions, variations in pupil-teacher ratio, changes in school policy, and modifications in curriculum. The question of how and why the school closed in 1940 remains unanswerable even when all relevant details of historical changes affecting St Mary's are available. The problem of untangling the effects that caused its closure remains intractable and clearly this issue lies at the heart of discussion about modern facilities being available at St Mary's. In conclusion, this paper has described the history of Catholic schools for female deaf children and highlighted the involvement of the Dominican and Mercy sisters in deaf education. The article is not just a 'tale' of two schools, it is a contribution to scholarship in the history of Irish education and the history of female religious in education.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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