CHAPTER TWO

MERCY FOUNDATIONS: BIRR AND NENAGH

2.1. The Mercy Foundation At Birr

The first Mercy foundation in the Killaloe diocese was made by Catherine McAuley in Birr on St. Stephen’s Day 1840. Birr was her thirteenth foundation and it was the last Irish foundation to be made before her death. John Spain, parish priest of Birr sought advice from the man known as the apostle of temperance, Father Mathew, regarding the unique problems existing in his parish. The latter, who had a great regard for Catherine McAuley, suggested that if a community of the sisters of Mercy could be established there, they would be a reparative influence and help to bring people who had fallen away back to the Catholic Church.

Reverend Mr. Mathew was a Capuchin friar who inaugurated a temperance crusade in 1838 and in a short time, was an influential and nationally known leader of the movement. Initially the temperance movements were almost entirely Protestant and middle class but the advance of the temperance society across class and age divides can be attributed to “an emotional mass response” to this man.1 It was a movement of popular self improvement, middle class patronage, promoting the values of thrift, industry and discipline.2 In his visits to many parishes in the Killaloe diocese, he aroused tremendous enthusiasm in the cause of temperance.

Fr. Mathew had the support of many of the influential Catholic middle class and his widely petitioned charity sermons guaranteed publicity and monetary success for the charities prevailing upon him. Financial considerations apart, Catherine McAuley’s respect for him is evidenced in many references to him in her correspondence. Serious consideration was given to his Birr foundation suggestion, profession dates would not be finalised until he signalled his intention or otherwise to attend. She deferred a proposed trip to Carlow because of his intended visit to Dublin.3

Despite the obscurity of his family background he was “brought up in intimate connection with the family” of Earl Mathew of Thomastown Castle and considered it

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3Holster, Angela. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.165.
home. He was described in newspapers of the day as a "gentleman of independent fortune" rather than as a cleric and a Capuchin, and references were made to his apparel of "fine black great coat and his linen is dazzlingly white". His oratory had the ability to move the minds and hearts of the populace but it was his acceptable connections with people of authority, and the emerging Catholic middle class, which made him a person whose counsel was sought by many, including John Spain.

The town of Birr or Parsonstown, was unusual in Ireland in that it was owned by an individual, Lord Rosse. It was a thriving business and market town with the Parsons family predominant in political and legal affairs. Its population, including Crinkle, in 1837 was 9,547. It was in ancient times the chief residence of the O'Carroll, the sub-king of Ely O'Carroll. It had its origin as a town probably in the establishment of the monastery of St. Brendan in the sixth century which was chiefly remarkable for its school and for the writing of the Gospels of Mac Regol of Birr. After a chequered history, Sir Laurence Parsons, an Englishman, took possession of the town in 1620, and by the letters patent, "it appears that Birr must have been then looked on as of considerable military importance; for it is there described as the castle and fort village and land of Birr." He made several ordinances for the regulation of the town, for example, for the regulation of street paving and cleaning, for the regulation of drinking-houses and "that no single woman should supply drink, on pain of being put in the stocks for three market days".

In 1837 it was inhabited by some wealthy and many respectable families. The trade was principally confined to two distilleries, each of which produced about 95,000 gallons of spirits annually, but a great variety of minor manufacture was carried on. Large quantities of corn, flour, spirits, butter, cattle, sheep and pigs were sold and in return, timber, iron, drapery, groceries, coal and most other articles for domestic consumption were brought in.

There was a fever hospital, a dispensary and a mendicity institution. A reading room was well supplied with newspapers and periodicals. The barracks which were one English mile distant, had accommodations for 48 officers of infantry, 1110 privates, and a hospital for 100 patients. There were eight places of worship in the town, Protestant,

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Footnotes:

8Malcolm, Elizabeth, Ireland Sober Ireland Free: Drink and Temperance in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.103.
9Ibid., p.107.
11Ibid., p.60.
12Ibid., p.74.
14Ibid., p.47.
Catholic, three Independents, Society of Friends, two Wesleyan and Methodist. At the time of Catherine McAuley’s proposed foundation, there were “about twenty schools in the town and parish, four of which are free schools.” There was a parochial school for boys aided by donation from the rector, a male and female school aided by donation from a benefactor and a female parochial school, supported by subscription. In all these there were about 400 children (no gender breakdown). Fifteen private schools give instruction to 350 boys and 250 girls. Bishop Kennedy, strongly supported the national school system and had personally applied for grants in 1838 for the school in Birr.

The circumstance which propelled the invitation to the sisters of Mercy to come to the town was unusual, in that the Catholic population in the town was deeply divided by what came to be known as the Crotty schism. The instigator was a priest called Michael Crotty who was appointed to Birr as curate in 1821. When he was found guilty in an assault charge in 1825, he denounced the two Catholic jury members from the altar and with them the whole of the chapel committee of which they were members. Crotty’s supporters launched an attack on the chapel committee and led the people to believe that fraud had been practised on them.

It was an example of ecclesiastical indiscipline which manifested itself in numerous local rebellions, in which a priest, suspended or transferred by his bishop, remained in forcible possession of his parish, backed by all or a section of his congregation. Although it was essentially a Catholic problem, Lord Rosse, who was Governor of the King’s County had to call out the troops to keep the peace on several occasions as violence erupted between the dissenting sides. This unhappy state of affairs had riven the Catholic community of Birr for fifteen years.

Numerous efforts were undertaken to address the problem during the height of the schism. For example the coadjutor bishop of Killaloe appointed Protestant auditors to examine the books of the chapel committee, accused by Crotty of perpetrating fraud. They found no evidence to support his claims. This did not quieten the Crotty faction. When the bishop went to Birr to declare the findings he was treated with “extraordinary irreverence in their place of worship.” In anger, he placed the parish under interdict, which is an extraordinary severe penalty for any parish. It basically means that any Christian activity including Sunday liturgies and the Christian burial of the dead, could not take place. In the

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13Ibid., p.103.
bishop’s eyes, Crotty was guilty of indiscretion and swift and severe action needed to be taken. Crotty must have been a very charismatic individual because the vast majority of the parishioners, especially the poor, supported him.

The appointment of Patrick Kennedy as administrator exacerbated the situation. Kennedy was a contentious individual and therefore unable to heal the breaches that had taken place in the parish of Birr, even though he lifted the interdict.

Confusion ensued when Crotty took over the chapel despite being formally suspended from all duties throughout the diocese. The support of Fr. William Crotty, a cousin, in 1832, consolidated Michael Crotty’s position. He continued to command immense support from his loyal followers. A meeting with Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin in 1833 failed to effect any form of reconciliation.

The Clare Journal, a newspaper published in Ennis, was sympathetic to Crotty. Birr and Ennis are part of the diocese of Killaloe. “The Roman Catholic Bishop and all the priests of the diocese have espoused Kennedy’s cause; the people to a man are for Crotty.” When Kennedy took a case against him, Crotty was found guilty of riot at the chapel and sentenced to 3 months imprisonment. Essentially the approach of the church authorities was hardline. The appointment of the administrator of the parish, Patrick Kennedy, in 1835, as coadjutor bishop, was a major blow to the Crottys. From 1828 until 1832 there were no major upheavals in Birr although the tension between the rival supporters occasionally spilled over into violence. The departure of the Crottys from Birr marked the waning of the schism but much bitterness remained.

It was to address this bitterness and to effect reconciliation between the Crotty faction and the Catholics, that Catherine McAuley was propelled to initiate a foundation in Birr. To Sr. Francis Warde, on June 6th 1840, she acknowledges the role that Fr. Mathew played.

The Rev. Mr. Mathew made me promise that immediately after Galway was done I would endeavour to make up a branch for Birr where the unfortunate Crottys have done so much injury to religion.

Fr. Mathew played an important role in encouraging the sisters to come to Birr. This is obvious from the fact that he preached a charity sermon in aid of the fund to

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11 Ibid., p.112
12 Ibid., p.126
13 Ibid., p.117
establish a convent there. The amount collected on that occasion, in March 1840, amounted to £63.5.0. It was an extraordinary amount of money for the time.

Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that Catherine herself was the main instigator of the Birr foundation. On 26th December 1840 to get to Birr, Catherine McAuley and her four associates travelled by canal to Tullamore to the first Mercy foundation to be made outside Dublin, where they stayed overnight. They journeyed by coach to Birr next day, accompanied by the parish priest Fr. Spain, who had met them at Enniscorthy. The four women who accompanied her were Sr. Aloysius Scott, Teresa White, Rose Lynch and Postulant Anne Marie Mc Evoy. The winter of 1840-1841 was unusually severe.

The woman chosen by Catherine McAuley to be superior of the Birr foundation was Sr. Aloysius Scott. Perusal of the magnificently illuminated Register of Membership, painted by the artist Sr. Clare Augustine Moore, reveals Elizabeth Scott entered Baggot Street in 1835 and was appointed Bursar in 1840. She had earlier in the year of 1840, spent three months at the convent in Carlow recuperating from “a severe attack of hemorrhage of the lungs”. While there, she “assisted in forming the choir, for which she copied music; she taught the sisters painting, printing and fancy-work.” In October 1840, a letter from Catherine McAuley discloses her plans to “tell her to prepare... She has got petting enough for one season”. She was to be the first superior of Birr, a position she held until her death in 1844, aged thirty.

Fr. Spain who became a stalwart support to the community, kept financial account. He was meticulous in his bookkeeping entries. The journal is still available in the Birr box in the archives. A house and field were rented for the community at an annual fee of £30.

In a lengthy letter Catherine describes a visit taken in the snow to a bereaved Crotty family who received her well initially, until the arrival of a neighbour, who made a number of little speeches to Catherine, to which she bowed low. She describes the renewal of their vows in the public church “to the great delight of Mr. Spain”.

The fact that the Mercy sisters were newcomers to Birr and untouched by the controversies of the previous fifteen years undoubtedly helped. To many people, too, they

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22 Ibid., p.16.
23 Sullivan, Mary C. Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p.231.
25 Birr Convent Archives, p.12.
26 Bolster, Angela. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.185.
were objects of curiosity as few had ever seen a nun. They immediately began to use every opportunity to make contact with the people who had followed the Crotty's and were still estranged from the Catholic church, but it was not easy. In fact the Annals declare that "Birr was the most difficult foundation which Mother McAuley ever undertook". She was in her sixtieth year, the last one of her life, yet she remained indefatigable. In the six weeks that she remained with the fledgling foundation, she wrote constantly and these letters give us some idea of how the sisters tried to approach the Crottyites and the problems they encountered.

To Sister de Sales in Bermondsey:

You have heard of the great injury done by the apostate, Crotty. We meet many who have not been present at Mass for ten or twelve years; and in almost every poor family there is still a deluded member to be met who through some evil infatuation follows the unhappy man. The bishop resides forty miles distant - Doctor Kennedy. I fear no patron of Nuns. It was from his diocese the Ursulines came to Galway. The Presentation branch that succeeded them in Lifford are not likely to remain.

Her comments regarding Bishop Kennedy were prescient in the light of future developments involving his lordship and the Mercy sisters.

At the end of this letter she writes "Poor Miss Beckett most anxious to return". The woman referred to was Marianne Beckett, an English convert, who entered in Baggot Street and left again, when she experienced doubts about her vocation. She was to have a lasting and an immense influence on the Sisters of Mercy future foundations in Birr and Nenagh.

Catherine McAuley's letters written during her six week stay in Birr, make comment on all kinds of social issues from the price of food to a telling comment on the National Education Board. "Had Mr. Carlile found it likely to injure the Catholic Church, he would not have abandoned it". This is the William Carlile former inspector with the National Board, who remained in Birr after the departure of the Crotty's to minister on the Presbyterian mission. She makes reference to seeing a candidate, "Miss Egan, twenty-four years old, a fine young person, educated in Thurles Convent." This was Susan Egan, whose father John Egan, was so disconcerted at his daughter's proposed entry to the

29Ibid., p.91.
30Ibid., p.91.
31Ibid., p.183.
convent, that he initially forbade her to enter. She was to become superior of the
foundation, in 1845, after the death of the first superior, Sr. Aloysius Scott.

One of Catherine McAuley's notable characteristics was the great personal interest
she maintained in all her foundations and the close community spirit she fostered. She
wrote consistently to the eight foundations made before Birr, what she called her
Foundation Circulars. These contained House of Mercy news, social comment on events of
the day, and advice delivered with humour. She addressed the sisters with such warmth as
"my very dearest, or my dearest." There are no hierarchical boundaries displayed between
them. She adapted her style of address to suit circumstances and recipients alike. Her letters
are underpinned with a strong spirituality, yet practical issues associated with the
organisation of a large house, school and hostel, concern her. She recommends where
household purchases might economically be made, and organises for the purchase of
clothes for the children in her care, and the myriad problems associated with running a
large house, school, and hostel which was home on occasion, to as many as fifty women
and children. There are proposed charity sermons, allied to the reception of new entrants,
to be arranged. She had a sense of humour which shines through her letters. A letter in
rhyme commiserates Sr. Ann's swollen knees developed during the cholera epidemic; nine
verses explain the delay to Marianne Beckett's note.32 There is comment on the effect of
Poor Law Tax, National Board of Education, the Temperance Crusade and Fr. Mathew.

She had a realistic appreciation of woman's position within the dominant
patriarchal and ecclesiastical structures and employed her own strategies for coping. When
the memorial to the Board of Education was made, she wrote that "it was signed by the
most respectable Protestants ... "33 The trials of clerical interference are indulged. "You
know he has strange humours and must be honoured."34 To Bishop Murphy of Cork,
requesting a letter of recommendation, to strengthen her application for final confirmation
of her Rule, she wrote: "My Lord, I would feel the parcel very light without a small tribute
from you."35 When a sister says the dowries are reduced to half, and adds that the bishop
will be very angry, Catherine's comment was that the sister's anxiety about the bishop's
anger, "shields from censure."36 She had a very strong female mode of leadership which
was holistic and participative. "Never suppose you can make me feel displeasure by giving
any opinion that occurs to you."37

32Central Archives, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin.
33ibid., p.99
34ibid., p.104.
35ibid., p.86.
36ibid., p.93.

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Before Catherine McAuley departed for Dublin, the sisters in Birr had put a school for poor children on a firm footing with more than 400 pupils, some of whom had transferred from a school run by Crotty. By mid-January they were busy converting the stable and coach-house into a House of Mercy, and were planning to make six bedrooms out of a section used to store oats and hay. Sr. Aloysius “discovered a spacious apartment which she broke through with a “great iron sledge.” The house of Mercy provided shelter for homeless women, who for want of proper protection might be exposed to danger. Since Birr was a garrison town, and a large army presence was maintained there, it is probable that many women would have followed soldiers around from one depot to another. Therefore one may presume that the house provided a refuge for some of these women.

The efforts of the sisters to counter the effects of the Crotty’s influence on the people of Birr began to show success. Mother Catherine reports that “Mr. Crotty is getting several preachers to Birr to recover some of his congregation stolen by the Sisters of Mercy.” But the bitterness which the schism had wrought, remained a part of the lives of many of the inhabitants. The difficulty which the sisters had with some schismatics is recorded in the Annals. “... these unhappy people will not raise the hand to make it, (to make the sign of the cross) or even suffer you to help them; and, while they pour out dreadful curses on the miserable man that dehuded them, they will not move one step to obtain reconciliation.” The abandonment felt by their supporters, when the Crotty’s left the town, must have been consolidated by a sense of grievance. The annals record the interesting observation that “there were those, too, who thought that had he been less sternly dealt with, he had never attained so unfortunate a celebrity.”

She returned to Birr in May for the reception ceremony of the young novices. It was an occasion of great importance for the young Birr foundation, and provided an ideal opportunity to make known the work of the institute. The attendance of the bishop and Fr. Matthew’s preaching of the charity sermon, attracted great numbers to the parish church where it was held.

It is clear that the sister’s mission in Birr was very successful in a short time. In the six months which had elapsed since their arrival there, Catherine McAuley was enthusiastic in her letter to Sr. Aloysius in Birr.

31Bolster, Angela, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841*, p.188.
32Ibid., p.216.
33Carroll, Mother Mary Austin, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, p.428.
34Ibid., p.438.
I cannot say how delighted I feel at the account of your numerous children. This will really and effectually undermine all the old Crotty roots and branches.\footnote{Ibid., p.242.}

It is about this time, June 1841, that she penned "The Spirit of the Institute" which is a document which spelled out her appreciation of Mercy life as a blend of contemplative and apostolic spirituality.\footnote{Ibid., p.242.} She was evidently deeply moved by the example and lives of the saints. Among the many significant changes Catherine made to the Rule of the Presentation Sisters when she revised it for the Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy was the addition of Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Genoa to the list of saints to whom she recommended particular devotion.\footnote{In conversation with Mary C. Sullivan, June 29, 1998.} These two woman saints were particularly renowned for their work on behalf of the poor and may have provided inspiration for her treatise on the spirit of the Institute which she sent to the convent at Bermondsey.\footnote{Ibid., p.242.}

She had a sure sense of her own spiritual leadership and conducted the retreat herself, when a priest was unable to keep the commitment. She later referred to herself, with self-deprecatinge sense of humour, as "Father McAuley."\footnote{Ibid., p.242.} This was just three months before she died. Despite her continued failing health, her interests were focused as always. She continued to maintain an interest in her last Irish foundation, asking if Dr. Spain had applied to the Board (of Education) yet? She gives interesting school statistics:

The school in Kingstown never was so numerously attended; Booterstown much increased and a great number here. We calculate that six hundred poor children in the Archdiocese receive daily tuition from our Sisters, thanks be to God. But going on well: four hundred and fifty in their school. All have left Mr. Crotty's and he is worse than ever, railing against priests and nuns.\footnote{Ibid., p.242.}

Less than one month before she died, in a letter to the Board of Trustees, Booterstown Convent, she endeavoured to clarify a situation arising from extra debts incurred in the building. She was clearly resisting any attempt to coerce her or her sisters to pay, even to the withdrawal of the sisters from Booterstown. There is no equivocation in her statement, "As to any legal proceedings, there is no occasion to have recourse to them. The Sisters can return here and whoever has a claim may take possession of the house until their demand is satisfied, if there is no other means of providing for it."\footnote{Ibid., p.267.} These are the

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\footnote{Boister, Angela. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.235.}
\footnote{Ibid., p.242.}
\footnote{In conversation with Mary C. Sullivan, June 29, 1998.}
\footnote{Boister, Angela. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.242.}
\footnote{Ibid., p.242.}
\footnote{Ibid., p.231.}
\footnote{Ibid., p.267.}
words of a strong, autonomous woman who would not have her boundaries encroached by threats.

By her adoption of nine children, Catherine McAuley bore human familial responsibility. The concerns of her three nephews, particularly the youngest one Willie, presented her with a very human challenge. The early deaths of the first two and Willie’s subsequent estrangement, saddened her. His parting with her in 1837 was strained, and he was presumed lost at sea when there was no further communication from him.

There were the human trials of coping with people, like poor Mary Clare Augustine Moore “a character not suited to my taste or my ability to govern, though possessing many very estimable points.” Mary Clare Augustine Moore was among the first (in 1844 or before) to solicit from those who had known Catherine, written and oral contributions for a projected memoir about her. With the trained eye of a fine artist she described Catherine’s appearance on the occasion of their first meeting. One of the touching ironies of Clare Augustine’s Memoir about Catherine is the absence in it of any hint of Catherine’s impatience towards her.

Catherine McAuley died at Baggot Street on November 11th 1841. The loss to the community is captured in the words of her first associate, Anna Maria Doyle.

The death of any one to whom the survivor has been united is a bereavement - it is hard to look the thought full in the face that we shall never see such a one again. But when that one has been light to one’s feet, the stay and encouragement of one’s very soul in the everyday difficulties and perplexities of life - the removal of such a one is a foretaste of death to those who remain behind.

The present-day act of coming to “know” Catherine McAuley, to the extent that any such knowledge can be real and is attainable, involves two movements: interpreting, in the context of her own time, the data of her character and actions and then interrogating these data from the perspective of present-day realities.

The Great Famine created a very unfavourable environment for new initiatives and so it is not surprising that there was no further foundation in the Killaloe diocese, until

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50 Ibid., p.204.
51 Ibid., p.194.
52 Ibid., p.194.
53 Ibid., p.75.
54 Ibid., p.240.
1854, when Mother Vincent Egan, Mother Anastasia (Marianne) Beckett, who was to be the new superior, and four other sisters, came to Nenagh.

2.2 The Sisters of Mercy in Birr, Co. Offaly.

The work of the sisters of Mercy in Birr continued to prosper. Before the departure of Catherine McAuley in February 1841, the school for poor children had 450 registered pupils. In 1842 a pension school, a “concession to meet the exigencies of the locality” was opened. This school catered to the daughters of the prosperous farming community and the growing middle class.

By 1844 the community was augmented by the addition of nine entrants. Sr. Aloysius Scott, appointed to be superior by Catherine McAuley resigned in 1844 for reasons of ill health. Sr. Vincent (Susan) Egan, a native of the town, was appointed superior with Sr. Anastasia (Marianne) Beckett appointed as her assistant.

Marianne Beckett was one of the early postulants received into the Birr community in 1842. The annals describe her as

slightly above middle height - straight rod - too straight to be graceful; but dignified and every movement refined. Fair hair somewhat sallow complexion, grey eyes - under lip: Austrian - she was reserved in general - but devoted in her friendships.

She entered originally in Baggot Street in 1840 and Catherine McAuley referred to her as “a convert of high connections, is quite equal to Sister Moore in all arts and science, languages, paintings.” Catherine’s previous allusion to “I feel very much for poor Miss B and I wish I knew what to do” refers to the crisis of faith Marianne Beckett was experiencing and which resulted in her temporary departure from the convent. With the exception of three years spent in Nenagh as Mother Superior, she remained in Birr until her death at age ninety one. A convert to Catholicism about the time of the Oxford Movement, she had been influenced by the Hon. and Revd. George Spencer, a former Anglican clergyman, now a Passionist priest and well known preacher. His attendance at her reception in 1842 in Birr excited great interest.

50Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Killaloe 1800-1850, p.155
51Archives, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MN/57.(1)
52Boister, Angela. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1827-1841, p.132.
The above description was the only handwritten personal description existing in the archives I had access to, of a sister written by one of her contemporaries. It is replicated here because of the important connection she makes from Catherine McAuley, through Birr to Nenagh. She lived until 1905 and "was a character not easily daunted or turned aside from its objective in time of trial and difficulty and unperiscopic surroundings had no other effect on her, but to bring into play a tenaciousness of purpose and a steady process of action that no obstacles however uninviting to tackle could withstand." 58

This woman, reputedly a collateral descendant of St. Thomas a Beckett, was to have a marked influence on the convents of Birr and Nenagh. She was born on 3rd September 1814 at Enville Hall, the seat of the Earl of Stanfod to whom her father Mr. John Beckett was agent. She was an only daughter, had two brothers the second died young. After the death of her parents she felt a strong desire to give herself to the service of God to belong to him in special way. 59

The pension school in Birr was placed in Sr. Anastasia's charge. The present divisions between primary and secondary education were far less clear-cut then and probably catered for a range of pupils from about the age of nine to 18. 60 The curriculum was typical of middle class girls' schools at the time, and from the legacy of poetry and art which survives her, it is fair to assume that her influence on the school was overt. She tried to maintain her connections with the mainstream of the cultural life of the time. She was naturally drawn to the arts and crafts movement and subscribed to the Aranadel Prints. In their spare time, Sr. Anastasia and some other sisters practised the craft of illuminated lettering. She designed two books in script on cream paper richly decorated with hand painting of a high standard and great variety. 61

The house in which the community lived was inadequate for present numbers and the decision was made by the sisters to build. The new superior Sr. Vincent Egan, was the girl Catherine McAuley felt was "worth a little trouble" when her father, John Egan initially tried to dissuade her from entering the convent. She was now twenty-eight years of age and with her assistant, Sr. Anastasia Beckett, she embarked on an ambitious building programme. The well known architect Augustus Welby Pugin, who was known to Sr. Anastasia, designed the convent. This building was the first purpose-built convent in the diocese and was a very impressive one. 62 The round tower, which gave the building a

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58 Archives, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MS/57 (1)
59 Ibid.
60 Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Killaloe 1850–1904, p.170.
Distinctive appearance was a link with and a reminder of the monastic tradition of Birr.\textsuperscript{53} It may also have been seen as a public manifestation of a new emerging Catholic confidence. It was ready for the sister’s occupation in 1847, before schedule.

While new church projects in the diocese were being abandoned because of lack of resources, the Mercy convent building gave local employment and was ready for occupation in 1847, before schedule.

Though the wages at the time were so low yet it was a boon to be able to earn even a trifle in town, as many had to walk miles to reach the point where a hill was being cut down or a hollow filled up. This being the form of employment being given by the Board of Works.\textsuperscript{64}

The famine in 1846 which brought devastation to many parts of the country did not have the same impact on Birr, because the Earl of Ross could petition the government on the townspeople’s behalf as he had done, in 1822, when there was hardship in many places because of the widespread failure of the potato crop.\textsuperscript{65} Previous to the appearance of the fatal potato,

they were so dry and floury and wholesome that they formed the staple diet of not only labourers but small farmers and in the case of the poor, they were refuse for the pig which was their bank, paid their rent and clothed them. Potatoes were so plentiful they were sold for 1d and half per stone in 1845.\textsuperscript{66}

Despite the general alleviation of the famine in Birr, poverty existed in areas of the town nonetheless, and care of the poor was Mother Anastasia’s Beckett’s special concern. The Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator of 3 January 1851 reported in 1850:

On Christmas Eve about 250 poor housekeepers were presented with bread, meat and candles by the sisters of Mercy, Birr, which they took to their own houses and on Christmas Day upwards of 150 children who attended the convent schools, sat down to a good substantial dinner.\textsuperscript{67}

From a table giving a representative, comparative sample of parish population in the diocese, in 1841, 1846, 1851, it is clear that Birr suffered least. There were only 123 inhabited houses (8%) lost, during the period, compared with the most westerly parish in the diocese, Moyarts and Kilballyowen, which lost 631 inhabited houses, (29%). Mass evictions were carried out during this period in West Clare. When Poulett Scrope M.P.

\textsuperscript{63}Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Kilaloe: 1800-1850, p.167.
\textsuperscript{64}Birr Convent Archives, MSS C12 in Central Archives, Baggot Street, Dublin.
\textsuperscript{65}Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Kilaloe: 1800-1850, p.34.
\textsuperscript{66}Birr Convent Archives, MSS C12 in Central Archives, Baggot Street, Dublin.
\textsuperscript{67}Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Kilaloe: 1800-1850, p.226.
visited Clare in the autumn of 1849 he inquired what had happened to the 20,000 people who had been driven from their homes in the previous two years.64

The death of the parish priest, John Spain on 10th May 1848, was a loss to the community. From the early days of the foundation, he was a support in what was then a hostile environment. Bishop Kennedy, who had been administrator of Birr during the Crotty schism, returned there to live, “as all vestiges of the ancient schism had disappeared, and as the feelings once so inflamed against his lordship had long since been calmed.”65 A difficult man, he was described as the “fighting cock” of the diocese.66 Catherine McAuley’s comment from Birr in 1841, “Doctor Kennedy, I fear no patron of nuns,” was proving to be correct.

For a year and a half, probably through some misunderstanding, his lordship deprived the community of the privileges it had heretofore enjoyed, and, in a manner, signed its death-warrant by forbidding the mother superior to receive subjects. At length it was necessary to invoke the intervention of Archbishop Murray, through whose reasoning and influence Bishop Kennedy finally allowed the Sisters to resume all their duties and privilege.67

Year later when Mother Anastasia was asked to explain she refused to comment, merely saying: “What is written in the annals stands.” The records show that for four years there were no new entrants to the community in Birr. The sister’s oppression, patriarchal and ecclesiastical, did not preclude them seeking a resolution to their difficulties, which consultation with the higher authority of the archbishop, afforded them. Archbishop Murray, “through whose reasoning and influence Bishop Kennedy finally allowed the sisters to resume all their duties and privileges, acknowledging that he had been mistaken as to their Rule and Constitutions.”68

In the 1850s Mother Anastasia Beckett and a companion went from Birr to Kinsale to observe how the lace and embroidery industry set up there by the Mercy sisters operated. On her return she set up a small industry attached to the school which generated extra income for the poor girls and women. Later, initiatives such as these got a boost from the Technical Instruction Act of 1889 which empowered local government bodies to grant-aid small industries from the rates.69

65Carroll, Mother Mary Austin. Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, p.440.
67Carroll, Mother Mary Austin. Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, p.441.
68Ibid., p.441.
69Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Killaloe: 1850-1904, p.181.
The building programme begun by the sisters in 1846 continued. By 1853 a large school and chapel were completed. The sisters of Mercy were particularly active in caring for orphans and this initiative was added to the apostolate in Birr, in 1864, when the plight of some children was brought to the attention of the sisters. When the house became inadequate for rising numbers, Mother Anastasia unofficially laid the foundation stone of the new building herself.

The Industrial Schools Act in 1868 enabled institutions like the Mercy sisters to become eligible for government subsidies, which allowed them to cater for greater numbers of children. The Birr orphanage was certified for 80 girls in 1870. To satisfy legal requirements, they became known as industrial schools and were subject to government inspection. Sir John Lentaigne, Inspector of Industrial Schools advised Mother Anastasia on the setting up of the school and they became great friends.

The Irish Poor Law Act of 1838 paved the way for the introduction of workhouses to be locally administered by a Board of Guardians. The sisters applied in 1851 for permission to visit the workhouse when religious tensions were particularly strong and met with a refusal from the Protestant-dominated Board. The ban on the sisters entering the workhouse in Birr remained in force until 1865, when there was an outbreak of cholera and nurses were required to look after the patients in the fever hospital and the sisters volunteered to take charge. When they were being formally thanked by the Board of Guardians, Mother Anastasia availed of the opportunity to offer the services of the sisters on a permanent basis. Permission was given to the sisters in Birr and in Nenagh, to visit the hospital on Saturdays and Sundays.

The first affiliation of the Birr convent was made in Nenagh in 1854.

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77Archives, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MS MN/57.
79Ibid., p.162.
2.3 The Mercy Foundation at Nenagh

The bishop of Killaloe Daniel Vaughan invited the sisters of Mercy to Nenagh to take charge of the national school for girls. When the sisters came to Nenagh in 1854 they found a town struggling from the horrors of "Black Forty-Seven". Unlike Birr, Nenagh did not escape the effects of the famine.

Nenagh is the capital of North Tipperary, situated in Upper and Lower Ormond; its population in the 1840s was 9,159. The name is derived from two Irish words, An Aenach, which mean a fair. Nenagh as An Aenach began its course in the year 130 A.D. It was probably a place of note before that time. Situated on the border line of the two Ormonds, in a level plain and convenient to the great highway of ancient times, the Shannon; situated also on one of the five great roads which led from Tara in ancient Meath to the south it was specially suited as a place for the Munster Aenach. Gleeson writes that Nenagh's social history is fascinating; its religious history is glorious; but its political history is melancholy.78

In 1837 Samuel Lewis noted

that a fever hospital and dispensary are maintained in the usual manner. An infantry barrack has been built on an eminence at the east end of the town. A brewery is carried on, and at Tyone is a flour-mill from which large quantities of flour are sent to Drumkeer, the nearest steam-boat station on the Shannon, about five miles distant. The town is supplied with water from wells and is neither paved nor lighted.

In the Roman Catholic division the parish is the head of a Union or district. It contains one chapel, situated in the town, where there is also a meeting house for Wesleyan Methodists and another for Independents. There is a parochial free school, and one under the board of National Education in which are about 290 boys and 150 girls. There are also six private schools in which are about 170 boys and 80 girls.79

Compared to Birr, which had two large industries, eight places of worship and twenty schools, the town to which the sisters of Mercy came in 1854, was considerably less well off. There was little industry in the town, and large numbers of semi-skilled farm workers were forced to emigrate following on the rapid contraction of tillage after the famine.80 Unlike Birr, Nenagh was devastated by the effects of the famine. Newspaper reports of heart-rending scenes outside Nenagh workhouse survive:

79Lewis, Samuel. A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland, p.189.
In 1849 there were 3,009 inmates in Nenagh Workhouse with 50 per cent deaths from cholera in John's Lane Fever Hospital, Brewery Auxiliary and Barrack Street Workhouses. In May 1849 at a meeting of the ratepayers, details were given of nearly 1,000 deaths, since Christmas, in the Workhouses of the Nenagh Union. That year 1849, "180 young women were assembled, in August in the dining hall of Nenagh Workhouse to undergo inspection by the emigration agent; they were aged between 15 and 19. All appeared cleanly despite the pauper dress. One hundred of the number are to be selected for a free passage to Australia."

Bishop Daniel Vaughan on being consecrated bishop of Killaloe made his residence in Nenagh. He was a popular priest of the diocese during the harsh regime of Bishop Kennedy, and he was very active in the local relief committee with the local Protestant bishop, during the famine. He had knowledge of the sisters work in Birr and invited them to establish a foundation and to take over the national school for girls. Their first house, offered to them by a priest, was in Summerhill, and it was the first of three moves they made, before settling finally in the old jail in 1887:

Few apartments were required for the little colony consisting of Rev. Mother M. Vincent Egan, Mother M. Anastasia Beckett, who was to remain as local superior, Sr. M. Xavier Spain, Sr. M. Margaret Mooney, Sr. M. Aloysius Scanlan and Sr. Agatha Weir. Preparation for school began immediately. Mother Anastasia formed a class in the coach-house with ladders for seats. The Lancastrian system was then in vogue and whatever may be thought of it now, it did good work - the idea was that children could teach children better than elder people.

The schools succeeded beyond expectations, with children from the surrounding countryside augmenting the numbers. One of the most striking aspects of the schools for the poor in the mid 19th century was the very large number of pupils in relation to the number of teachers. A ratio of nearly one hundred pupils to one teacher would not have been unusual. The efficacy of the Lancastrian system was evident. The idea was that young girls could teach children better than older people, that their minds were more on a level, not knowing too much they were not likely to fall into the error of talking above the heads of the little ones. The monitors, who were usually older pupils, aged from 14 to 17 years, learned the teaching methods under supervision and taught the younger children.

In those days National schools were not expected to be much more than a shelter for children with sufficient seating accommodation to enable writing and needlework to be taught. As a rule, both teachers and children stood during the lessons. Playground or

83 Birr Annals, Central Archives, Baggot Street, Dublin, C.12.
84 Murphy, Ignatius, The Diocese of Killaloe: 1850-1904, p.168.
classrooms did not form part of the essentials. The school was affiliated to the National Board which gave some badly needed financial help. In June 1856 there were 491 girls on the school register with an average attendance of 216 girls for the previous six months.

The Sunday school was opened to cater mainly for girls in domestic service. Many women were taught to read, write and do simple accounts; several elderly women came and applied diligently until they succeeded. The bishop usually came in on Sundays, stood in the rostrum and lectured the girls on their duties. "He always contrived to make droll remarks which delighted his simple audience and frequently impressed them more than a serious lecture." As he lived quite near, he constantly visited the sisters, entered into all their plans for aiding the poor and instructing the children.

The role of the sisters was basically one of combating poverty and the results of poverty. This was focused more on the paradigm of educating girls, rather than challenging the structures of society. Their sense of self had been shaped by the prevailing philosophy regarding the attributes of the ideal women. Their educational work was one aspect of their service to the poor and deprived. In other words, by helping young girls to read and write they were providing them with an entree into teaching. It was developmental education, rather than revolutionary one. A huge percentage of these girls emigrated and brought the skills acquired from the sisters with them.

Home visitation of the sick, tending orphans and engaging in catechesis was a most important part of the Mercy apostolate in Nenagh. The sisters cared for the poor and sick in Fulvey's Lane and Ball Alley Lane, "where no-one ever succeeded in knowing all the various entrances and exits." These lanes were overcrowded, insanitary, warrens of disease, where the scenes were indescribable. "The poverty was only equalled by the dirt and untidiness which prevailed everywhere. Even in more open lanes it was quite usual to find the donkey lodged with the family." Coming from comfortable home backgrounds, it is clear that the sister's visits to these hovels dismayed and grieved them. They note they "were always treated most courteously." The practical expressions of Mercy apostolate in visiting the poor, in the lanes of Nenagh, must have given the poor some sense of dignity and respect. Of course the sisters perception of the poor was influenced by the prevailing philosophy of the "deserving poor."

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85 Nenagh Archives, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MS MN/57.
87 C12, Central Archives, Digget Street, Dublin.
88 Luddy, Maria. Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.53.
89 Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Killaloe: 1850-1904, p.162.
emerged in relation to the sister’s home visitation, between the poorer and better-off groups:

Among the poorer classes, when anyone was ill, it was thought necessary to have the sisters as well as the doctor or the priest – it was different with the more respectable class, they seemed to fear that asking the sisters was a sort of forewarning of death, and were reluctant to invite them, except in extremity. Yet all sought their prayers and advice in every emergency.

People the sisters visited, managed to survive with humour, despite their great poverty. There was a woman who proudly showed the sisters “father’s soutane” which she had made into a frock for herself. Sr. Xavier Spain, had her trials as a native of the town when her classes were interrupted each day by Jimmy, a simpleton, who pushed open the classroom door and called a greeting to “Sarah.”

As in the early days of the Institute in Birr, the public ceremony of profession or reception was made in the parish church. The attendance of the bishop at the first Mercy sister’s profession in Nenagh in 1855, was “a great attraction and served to make the object of the Congregation better known.” The public ceremony also asserted the growing confidence of the post-penal Irish church. “Every opportunity in the cause of religion was hailed with joy.”

The Synod of Thurles 1850 followed shortly on the return to Ireland of Cardinal Paul Cullen, the man who more than any other was to dominate the affairs of the Irish Catholic church over the next quarter century. The new bishops appointed by Cullen tended to be successful administrators and he did not readily tolerate those incumbents who diverged from his viewpoint. The impact of the great famine and emigration was such that a new stronger landowning class evolved which was an important new element in Catholic society. Growing prosperity among the middle classes also ensured better financial support for the Catholic clergy. Cullen’s aim was to bring structure and discipline into the church, and naturally this was reflected at parish level.

A note in the Nenagh annals, dated 1 May 1855 the strictures on the sisters: “Rev. Mother M. Vincent Egan, Mother M. Anastasia Beckett, Sr. M. Xavier Spain, Sr. M. Rose O’Meara (novice), Sr. M. Agnes Egan (postulant) and Sr. Agatha Weir, Lay sister - let out to make the feliation of Holy Cross. A.M.D.G.” As the sisters of Mercy were a

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91Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, SC104/44
92Connolly, Sortal. Religion and Society in Nineteenth Century Ireland, p.12
94Ibid., p.175
congregation of diocesan rite they did not have a mother-general or centralised organisation, and according to canon law, they were subject to the bishop to a far greater degree than congregations which had their own mother-general. It is curious to note that the two able women leaders of the group were women who were superiors of two successful foundations, in Birr and Nenagh, had established schools, purchased houses, invested dowers. Perhaps anecdotes such as the foregoing, screen strategies of compromise which many women of the time, religious or lay, were obliged to employ? When they were invited to open a convent in Tulia, they declined, on the basis that the building was too small. They were clear in their objectives and in what was realistically possible for them to achieve, despite the entreaties of the Tulia parish priest.

The Nenagh annals is the source material for contemporary accounts of local history. The Mutiny of the North Tipperary Militia at Nenagh, the execution of the McCormack brothers, and accounts of the Land War are all recorded. The often central role of the sisters in the community is demonstrated in the confidence placed in them by the local clergy. For instance during the battle of the militia, the bishop brought his two nieces to the convent for protection. After "one of the most painful events in the history of Nenagh," the execution, on May 11th 1858, of two brothers William and Daniel McCormack, aged twenty-eight and twenty-five respectively, "Fr. Cleary brought the sisters of the McCormack brothers down to the convent, amidst torrents of rain, to Mother Anastasia for consolation." By comparison with Birr, the town of Nenagh was a more turbulent place in which to live in the 19th century. The Fenian movement was strongly supported in Nenagh and during the insurrection of 1867, restrictions were placed on the townspeople, by increased army activity and the arrests of many inhabitants. At one time during the rising, eight hundred prisoners were confined in Nenagh jail. Several persons were hanged.

As the schools and community work progressed, it became necessary to augment the number of sisters and to provide adequate accommodation, Mother Anastasia purchased the bank house in Castle Street. The sisters moved to their third home in 1858, where they remained until she negotiated, with the help of Fr. Flannery, a curate in Nenagh, for the acquisition of the old gaol nearly thirty years later. The sisters continued to teach in the school in Chapel Lane which was to the ree of the new convent so the postern gate was an advantage for access; "indeed from back-hall door to the school was scarcely a doz. perches."

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96Birr Annals, Central Archives, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
97Ibid.
98Ibid., SC 10/44.
On the death of Mother Vincent Egan in Birr in 1860, Mother Anastasia returned there as Reverend Mother. She had spent just three years in Nenagh, and in that time she had increased the school numbers to 711 on the roll, opened a Sunday school, and inaugurated a considerable home visitation apostolate. Despite her departure for Birr, Mother Anastasia continued to play a major part in the history of the Nenagh community. She was replaced by Mother Evangelista Cahalan, a native of Nenagh, as Mother Superior, from 1861 to 1865.

The sisters of Mercy were pioneers in the sphere of pastoral visitation. Through them for the first time since the Reformation, the Church in Killaloe diocese had an organised systematic caring service for the poor.99 They received permission, in 1866, from the Board of Guardians to visit the workhouse, “to give instructions and comfort the poor people.” Permission had initially been given in Birr, subsequent to an outbreak of cholera there, when Mother Anastasia and three sisters attended patients suffering from the dreaded disease. The workhouse hospital was visited on Saturdays. For many reasons the Poor Law System was thoroughly disliked. Visitors to the hospital were admitted “on particular days with a ticket.”100

Dr. Power was consecrated coadjutor bishop in 1865. He was extremely kind to the community, having been in the neighbourhood of Birr during their troubles there with Bishop Kennedy. He held profession and reception ceremonies in Nenagh on a few occasions when it was inconvenient to hold them in Birr. When Rev. Mother wished to see him on business, he invited her to bring three sisters with her to stay at his residence in Killaloe where he was most hospitable to them. At this time Mother Anastasia was asked to establish a convent in Stourbridge in Worcestershire and she went there to make arrangements. The location was attractive as it was a short distance from her family home. The annals note that “not finding the conditions proposed suitable to the requirements of the Order, the Sisters relinquished the project.”101 However, this was not the case. Bishop Power refused to let her go.

If the foundation in England is to depend on you leaving Birr and going to take charge of it I am sure it will never be established because I will not under any circumstances consent to such a proposal. We cannot do without you and as I have the power I am resolved to detain you so dismiss it from your mind for the present and for the future.102

99Murphy, Ignatius. The Diocese of Killaloe: 1850-1904, p.182.
100Nenagh Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MS MN/37.
101Carroll, Mother Mary Austin. Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, p.444.
102Central Archives, Convent of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin, MS MN/58.
This is an illustration of the paradoxes which exist, when attempting to interpret some primary sources. The tone of the letter with the insistence on obedience, appears to be an exposition of oppression, but conflicting realities exist in this interpretation. The congregation was very much under the authority of the bishop, but the sisters exercised a certain autonomy within the ecclesiastical structures. Mother Anastasia was in fact regarded highly by Bishop Power. For instance, when Mothers Vincent and Anastasia refused to make a foundation in Tulla, their decision was accepted. Friendships existed between the sisters and the clerical leadership. When Bishop Power attended the Vatican council in 1870, the sisters made all the pontificals he required. When his health gave cause for concern when he was in Rome, Mother Anastasia sent him a prescription and a light soutane to wear when the heat overcame him. On his return, his visit to Nenagh convent, in the company of bishops Butler and McEvilly of Limerick and Galway respectively, “the most happy dispositions of all three was recorded in the Nenagh annals of 1870. Dr. Butler was “devoted to sisters of Mercy as two of his own sisters belonged to the order.”\textsuperscript{103}

Letters from Bishop Power to Mother Anastasia, sixteen of which survive,\textsuperscript{104} are testimony to a friendship of equals, and it is clear from them that her opinion was one he sought and valued. A wide range of issues, from difficulties with people, to topics of business are discussed. For example, there was the difficulty with a Miss Hector, and his fear “that she might have attempted to murder some of the sisters at Nenagh or set fire to the convent.”\textsuperscript{105} He sought her influence to encourage Mother Xavier in Killrush to obey him. He had ordered the Killrush superior to return some fields to Colonel Vandeleur, the owner, but she had refused. Vandeleur sought the intercession of the bishop who had not been successful.\textsuperscript{106} Power discloses to her his distrust of trustees and how he had recently made the chapel of Killadoe a fee farm. He advises her to do the same with the convent. It is clear from the language he used that he recognised in her a woman of great intelligence and strength. This manifest appreciation of a woman’s mind as equal to that of man, is unusual for the time.

Women religious were often doubly oppressed, yet records represent Mother Anastasia Beckett as a self motivated achiever of formidable stature. From the council in Rome he wrote on 5th June 1870, to offer congratulations on her re-election as Superior. “The last election broaches strong testimony of the confidence, fidelity and the love of the community towards you. Such a result can hardly be hoped in any other convent.”\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{103}Birr Archives, C.12., Central Archive, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
\textsuperscript{104}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107}Birr Annals, MS 54(2), Central Archive, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
\textsuperscript{108}Ibid.
During these years, financial concerns were exercising constraints on the Nenagh nuns. The works of mercy were increasing and a greater number of sisters were required. The Nenagh community now numbered eleven. Financial struggles are alluded to, in the Annals, but they are not expanded upon. “Nenagh convent passed through many vicissitudes.” Sisters sold their personal property to ensure continuance. Records show that Mother Clare sold little scraps of property which she had inherited, among them Ivy House which was in ruins but was a valuable site. It accrued £30 to the coffers. Benefactors occasionally “were raised up by Almighty God.” A kind priest’s £20 is gratefully noted. “The admission of suitable subjects was hampered because they had “no (sic) sufficient dower for their support and it was decided that government funds, trifling as they were” might be used.108

Convent schools were paid by capitation and at the period when the sisters opened the national school in 1854, “the munificent sum of 4 shillings per pupil annually” was the amount of the grant. In the early days of the Institute the sum received from the Treasury was not appropriated to the use of the sisters, but given in charity, or permitted to accumulate for some undertaking. The quarterly salary reached the sum “of ten pounds or eleven.” In 1872, when “result fees were added to the four shillings a year capitation grant, it was considered a boon.”109

The Powis Commission of 1870 recommended that a system of payment by results be introduced in Irish national schools. The recommendation was accepted by the government and in 1872 a new programme came into effect in schools throughout the country.110 This system laid down minimum standards for each pupil which had to be attained before the pupil moved on to the next grade. The obligatory subjects were reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic for all classes, grammar and geography from third class upwards; needlework for girls from first class and agriculture for boys from fourth class.111

The teaching sisters found difficulty with the system. The effort to have the children up to the required standard was very great. It was recorded that “it was no small task to have “smart and stupid” equally clever. However it was only the first step in the onward march but was the step forward or retrograde. There is no doubt examinations are a spur to children to learn but the cram necessary to gain results left no time to really educate the children. Those who tried to do so found that their pupils did not pass - and found again

108 Nenagh Convent Archive, MS/57.
109Ibid.
111Ibid.
that pass pupils promoted to their class were very deficient indeed! Almost every year saw some new fad taken up and dropped after a time - it was always ploughing and sowing but nothing got time to grow.112

The congregation of eleven sisters in Nenagh had a large number of commitments to the Nenagh community. The Sunday school continued the service of providing skills like reading, writing and simple accounts which were invaluable, for the large numbers of poor girls and women from the locality, who continued to emigrate. Permission was given to the sisters, in 1873, to visit the county jail, which they availed of on Sundays, to instruct the female prisoners.

The decision of the Board of Guardians in 1881, to invite the sisters to take charge of Union Hospitals in Birr and Nenagh is recorded with pleasure in the annals:

This was quite a departure from the ordinary course of events but was thought and spoken of at the time as a means of gaining souls. Permission was given to preserve the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel. Mass was offered daily, an opportunity for weekly confession, rosary in the evening, benediction on great festivities, May devotions. It was a great and lasting change.113

The decision by the government to hand over the Poor Law Union hospital, the so-called Workhouse Hospitals, to the care of the Sisters of Mercy was decisive and significant in involving sisters in the work of the state.114 The sisters viewed it as an opportunity to attend to the spiritual needs of the patients on one level, but they also brought considerable commitment to improving conditions on a temporal level. Sisters went to Tipperary town and Cashel to be initiated in the duties of a Union hospital. They brought cleanliness and order out of the unbelievable conditions that existed in the Workhouse. There was no water and no sanitary accommodation in these buildings, and it was in these surroundings that the sisters worked from seven o’clock in the mornings until ten o’clock at night.115 The Guardians were most anxious to accede to the requests of the sisters, making one improvement after another as necessity required.116

When a priest of the parish died in 1893, and left £2,000 to found an orphanage under the care of the sisters, it was not opened until 1895. These individual nuns irrefutably "transcended the eternal feminine to a greater degree than most of their married

112Nenagh Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MS 57.
113Nenagh Archives, MS57.
116Birr Annals, C12., Central Archive, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
sisters.""\textsuperscript{117} They invested the money in G.S.R Debenture until they had at least two years interest to begin with. The accrued interest for the first half year to 1st July 1894, which amounted to £31 is carefully noted, plus the second half year's interest, to 1st January 1895, which was £30.18.8. Because the orphanage was not state recognised, it was not eligible to receive state aid, and the sisters funded it from their own resources. They employed monitresses to assist them in the care of the orphans."\textsuperscript{118}

There was movement at this period, 1884, to obtain an increase in capitation grants for convent schools. The nuns were concerned that if the grant was increased, the schools should improve, not only an advance in subjects taught, but also in the buildings. The schools in Chapel Lane were not only very far behind in conveniences and position, but also becoming more dilapidated. The Fenian movement at an end in 1886," the countryside depopulated by emigration, the workhouse giving better food, so that starving wretches no longer broke windows in order to be sent to jail," all combined to empty the prisons throughout the county. "The stronghold of North Tipperary was derelict."\textsuperscript{119} An Act of Parliament had been passed which decreed that "unless given for some of the purposes mentioned therein" that in one year from the passing of the Act, the jail should lapse absolutely to the grand jury.

Mother Anastasia Beckett, through Fr. Dan Flannery, a priest in Nenagh, mobilised support for the possible purchase of part of Nenagh prison for use as a convent and schools. She directed Fr. Flannery to communicate with prominent politicians for example, David Sherlock M.P. Sir R. Hamilton and Count Moore of Moorestort. She herself personally enlisted the support of Lady Hamilton.\textsuperscript{120} She detailed expenditure on the Castle Street house, calculated exactly the good investment for money the property would be, and planned the potential suitability of the different buildings to the needs of the sisters:

I fancy the Governor's house would make a nice convent - and a block of cells would complete it - if the remainder could be converted into schools - then the female prison could serve hereafter for other purposes ...\textsuperscript{121}

The two storerooms will make grand schools under the eye of the convent. When they have both boards joists and floors, inking them down and having only two storeys in each - larger school 50ft long and the yard has covered sheds for play on wet days - doors can be opened from the road and a backyard for the children's entrance without interfering with the front approach to convent.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{118}Barr Annals, SC/16/44, Central Archive, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
\textsuperscript{119}ibid., C12.
\textsuperscript{120}Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MN/3.
\textsuperscript{121}ibid., MN/3 (8).
\textsuperscript{122}ibid., MN/3 (10).
The new incumbent of the Killaloe diocese did not have the regard of his predecessors, for Mother Anatasia’s ability, and she was aware of it. But his attitude did not deter this seventy three year old woman in her plans.

She directed Fr. Flannery to first and foremost to go to Killaloe, himself, with the estimates:

If you thought useful, I wd (sic) run over on Monday and back on Tuesday but you must go to the bishop. He has no notion of my settling the business.123

Finally on 24 June 1887, the Governor’s house and grounds, the entire female prison, the two infirmaries and four prison blocks were handed over for educational and technical purposes to the sisters of Mercy.124 Her letter to Fr. Flannery expresses her delight and lists the practicalities to which she must immediately attend. The formal permission required from the National Board to transfer the school has already been requested. “So we are really keepers of the prison … I have written to the Board to ask permission to transfer part of the school to the jail, next week.”125

The annalist describes leaving the old house in Castle Street, on 9th October 1888. She describes the beds being lifted up Peter Street like “headless carriages… which was thronged with pigs and sellers for it was the eve of a fair.” Mother de Pazzi, “determined to have everything up” to their new abode quickly, stood at the door of the old convent and called the school children as they passed and gave them something to carry. She recalls her horror on lifting the quilt cover of a basket carried by two little girls to see that it contained the cell vessels. “It must have been my good angel that inspired me to get it taken inside away from the children.”

This nun gives us a unique insight into the personal feelings of a woman religious in an Irish country town one hundred and fifty years ago. “I went to take a last look at the little chapel where I received my white veil and where I pronounced my vows, then to the Oratory, the association of which had been opened by the Bishop Dr. Power, contributing to it £5.0.0 on my profession day in the year 1863.” The first night spent in Nenagh Jail caused her sleeplessness and apprehension.

I spent the rest of that night indulging the strange sensation I felt in being in a cell alone in the formidable “Nenagh Jail” and in that part too which had been the prisoner’s chapel, the very boards which formed our partitions

123Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MN/3 (11).
125Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MN/3 (12).
being the same the prisoners stalls were composed of. This caused a thrill of horror to pass through me as I had heard particulars of each of their cases when I was a child and the “Drop” was in view of my bedroom window at home. It required an effort to venture alone into one of the prison blocks.  

The jail served as classrooms for the next twenty years. One by one the buildings were utilised, from the Governor’s house for the convent, to the store which formed the national schools. Every effort was made to induce the children to attend school regularly. In this regard the great assistance of two lay women is gratefully acknowledged. They took an interest in the schools and “got up competitions in needlework and darning, gave prizes and made and distributed clothing to poor children and gave school parties.”

The Intermediate Act (1878) was a landmark decision, because it created the conditions for further change in girls’ education. The sisters responding to the requirements of the daughters of the middle class, opened a pension school in 1887, in what was the male infirmary. Apart from the basic subjects, the girls were taught languages, music, painting, drawing and fancy needlework. This school closed in 1900 and the girls transferred to the National school when the curriculum expanded.

The Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, 1881-1884, took evidence at a number of centres of industrial education, in search of a masterplan for a scheme of technical instruction, designed to Irish industrial needs. The scheme had foresight in recommending that “all institutions should spring from the wants and wishes of the locality…” The annalist in Nenagh records her difficulty in restraining from giving some reply when “some Scotch gentleman came, blaming people in general for not being prepared. When it was said this is being talked of for a long time, why did not eligible nun study it and be ready. The answer was, ” so many things have been talked of that come to naught you see (sic) not blame them.”

A number of initiatives were set up in a technical department attached to the school. A teacher “of the manufacture of crochet lace” gave lessons in the art to some nuns, who in turn taught it to the girls. The laundry belonging to the jail had always been kept in order. It only required some new troughs and a boiler which were speedily procured. Sewing machines were purchased, tables made and a large room in the pension school was given over to a needlework class. One of the workshops in the prison block was renovated as a

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126 Annals, Convent of Mercy, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, MN 57/1.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., p.270.
129 Ibid., p.267.
cookery room with “range and dresser furnished with all things.” The laundry and cookery room were to be used on different days by the national and technical schools.

The school opened in 1897 in what had been the female prison. The pupils who attended the school ranged from aged sixteen to twenty-four. Many girls cycled in long distances to the school from the surrounding countryside. Lessons changed every two hours and involved a new roll call of those present. They were paid according to the amount and quality of their work while they were in training.

The sisters availed of every opportunity to broaden the educational facilities for girls and women in Nenagh. When a mission was given in Nenagh in 1897, one of the priests was discovered to be a special advocate of the method of teaching singing, called Tonic Solfe. The sisters used the opportunity to take lessons from him every day during recess. To obtain further instruction they engaged a woman to come from Dublin to teach them. Sisters came over from Birr to avail of the lessons and “cre long they had mastered the art sufficiently to introduce it in the schools. It was found to be a wonderful boon that the National Board took it up and sent an instructor to form a class of all the neighbouring teachers in our school.”

Rev.(sic) Mother who was much interested in science, engaged a teacher, in 1898 to teach science to the sisters. This tuition laid a good foundation which enabled those who had a special taste for it to become teachers. Later when the National Board took it up, an organiser was sent, the subject continued to be taught.

At the end of the 19th century, the impact on the communities of Birr and Nenagh, by the sisters of Mercy, was multi-dimensional. There was an organised and systematic caring service for the poor and orphaned girls in place. Their commitment to the vision of education for poor girls and women, was attended to by the provision of schools, at primary, secondary and technical level.

\[131^\text{Birr Annals, C.12, Central Archive, Sisters of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin 2.}\]
\[132^\text{Ibid.}\]