CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to look at the life and achievements of a woman, Catherine McAuley, who lived in the early part of the 19th century. Although much has been written about her, she is one of a group of women who have been poorly represented from a feminist perspective. She was a radical, upperclass, ascendancy woman, who was prepared to forego a privileged position, in order to achieve her goal.

Her strategy for survival and continuity, was to found a religious order of women as a stable means of responding to her primary goal. From the outset, in the Rule and Constitution, her language about women is deliberately non-sexist. She eliminated some of the traditional patriarchal provisions for women religious, especially many that sought to describe the role of the Mother Superior in terms usually reserved for male paradigms of power.

The world in which she lived was overwhelmingly patriarchal: economically, socially, politically, and ecclesiastically. Women's proper sphere in 19th and early 20th century Ireland was in the home where, apart from a formative role within their families, women were excluded from any decision-making groups. This woman challenged some of these structures and while being forced to remain within them, she had a number of achievements. She was an astute businesswoman who negotiated and invested to ensure the continuance of her foundation, which she institutionalised. This dissertation demonstrates that her achievements were creative and mould-breaking initiatives.

The implicit criticism of social structures that is involved in confronting the status quo on behalf of women by creative alternative actions, was rooted for her through the provision of education and the shelter and empowering of young women. She worked in a way we would call feminist because she employed feminist values of caring, compassion and political action especially on behalf of poor women. She organised her foundations in a way that was participative and as non-hierarchical as one could expect in the 20th century. Despite the fact that they operated within the constraints of an ecclesiastical world, much was achieved. I have looked at two foundations: Birr and Nenagh, and have shown that they made a significant contribution to the development of both towns.

The concept of national identity developed by the Irish Free State, and the image of traditional Irish woman espoused by the Catholic Church, made it difficult for the radical values of McAuley to thrive. The participative process initiated by her had been diminished
by the 1930s. Reverend Mothers had become the decision-makers in a somewhat autocratic way. Up to the 1960s there were few new initiatives and there was an acceptance of structures that had developed in the previous few decades. They were affected by the wider social ethos and were co-opted into the dominant culture, although a certain few did try and remain of service to the dispossessed, outside of hierarchical and societal constraints. Religious life offered women the possibility of taking up positions of leadership and power in a society which otherwise excluded them.

In more recent times, it is interesting to see how this process has been reversed. There is an effort to return to the founder's impulse. They have relinquished their positions of authority and they have disengaged themselves from the dominant secular culture of contemporary Ireland. Because these women are part of modern Irish society and sometimes received a negative press, I felt it was worthwhile to look at contemporary voices to see whether the spirit of Catherine McAuley was carried on or diminished.

My conclusion is that, despite many obstacles along the way, the initial spirit has survived. A present Mercy Mission Directive expresses the commitment to "promote the dignity of women ... to challenge unjust systems and structures." The sisters have given examples of this in their care of girls and women in contemporary society. It is a very interesting exercise because one can see the circle, which began with a women and her "walking nuns", responding to the genuine needs of women from positions of powerlessness, returning to that position today. They are now more in tune with the original inspirations of the founder than when they were in the period of the ascendancy. They are also more vulnerable because of the lack of aspirants and because many sisters have moved away, by choice, from key positions of power in conventional society. Some of the modern day negativity with regard to religious orders has dissipated, since the sisters voluntarily ceded their key positions in schools and hospitals. It was perceived that close association with Church and State had an oppressive dimension to them.

Many of the sisters live in communities outside convent structures and have created patterns of feminist social organisation that are holistic. These patterns are contrary to the hierarchical and patriarchal mores which the dominant institutions of our modern world espouse. They are committed to "develop, nurture and live out of an integrated spirituality which finds its roots in the realities" of their lives. This feminist perspective acknowledges that all life is connected and is not divisible. These communities of Mercy women are a viable model for a certain dimension of Christian feminist critique and praxis. They are women living together who are able to critique hierarchical structures of power and who are

concerned about women's experience. They are attempting to establish a lifestyle which is empowering rather than exploitative or domineering both for themselves and for other women. They foster autonomy rather than dependence among marginalised women on a national and global level.

Finally, there are limitations in a micro study of this kind. There are difficulties in analysing the data because very little has been recorded in the archives and because of the timidity of annalists in writing up records which might appear to be self-aggrandising. Self-effacement did not allow sisters to record what we would now consider their achievements. One has to read very much between the lines to extract the information. In some of the interviews the same reticence was exhibited with regard to personal disclosure and talk of accomplishments did not come easily to these women.

Certain points mentioned in this dissertation would warrant further research and could become the base of another interesting study. For example, how did women who were high achievers cope with community life and the vow of obedience? Did women leaders in 19th and 20th century Ireland develop their full potential within institutionalised religious communities? How did the achievements of women religious in these periods compare to their contemporaries living in the secular society of the period? The personal stories of some of the Mercy sisters, Marianne Beckett and Mary Clare Augustine Moore, for example, would also be worth investigation.

From this study, it is clear that these women have not received due recognition and any comprehensive study of modern Irish feminism needs to take seriously the achievements and the limitations of a group of women like the Mercy Sisters. It would be doing a disservice to women's history to overlook these women's lives and what they have achieved for women. Living in the Mercy congregation today are strong women who need to be taken seriously and given recognition by the Irish feminist movement. This strand of Irish feminism ought to be heard and recorded before it is too late.
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APPENDIX A

I was a stranger and you took me in.

Those that instruct many unto justice shall shine like stars for all eternity.
APPENDIX B

I was abused and you gave me support and comfort.

Enable and support women and children.
APPENDIX C

I was sorrowful and you comforted me.

I was in need and you clothed me.
APPENDIX D

Page 3 of Catherine McAuley's handwritten manuscript of the original Rule of the Sisters of Mercy.

1st. The letters shall not commence, that is, words of charity, grace, and sentiments of good to society and of kindness to the helpless, of the poor and wretched. They shall be short, concise, and directed to the poor, to whom it shall be a comfort and advice, where it may be given and received, and whenever a religious, a poor, and such other person generally to be found.

2nd. The letters of the Irish.

1st. Among the principal faithful that by Jesus Christ to those who were the friends of following Jesus have in all ages of the Church, existed the faithful brethren, a particular manner to aid and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they offered the friends of their Divine Master, who has said: "I say to you: As you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me."

2nd. In the same manner were performed by the faithful the works of charity, as the poor and sick people were aided. The faithful brethren of the Irish have directed their love to the works of charity—among these, Saint Brigid, Saint Helen, Saint Mary, Saint John, Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Stephen, Saint Augustine, Saint Teresa (the Visitation), Saint Catherine (of France), and the poor were especially distinguished. The faith of the people, and the poor, was especially performed, and the help and comfort for the sick, the helpless, to fulfill the poor, and all those who had the care of them.

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Questionnaire

Section A.

Why did you join Mercy sisters?
   Was it in pursuit of an ideal or for social reasons?
   Who joined with you?
   What calibre of woman joined?
Do you consider that you made any sacrifices? What did you gain?

Section B.

Work: What did Mercy sisters set out to accomplish? What was the vision for the work girls could do and what they could accomplish?

Power: Who were the power brokers?

Eclesiastical Authority: How did you relate to this?

Section C.

Society: What are your reflections on Irish society at the time?
   Did you think that women were marginalised?
   How did you see yourself relative to the "outside world"?
   What political changes did you witness?
   What impact did government policy have on your work?