



Memoir:
Journeying with nuns
Author:
Marilyn McMeniman

Growing up in Queensland, it was almost impossible to be unaware of the influence of the Sisters of Mercy. The Mercy nuns were pioneers in education and health care in Queensland, established All Hallows' Convent, the first secondary school for girls in Brisbane and the Mater Hospitals. The first group of Irish sisters arrived in the colony in 1861 with baggage including a piano and a harmonium, and All Hallows' – which became the home base of the Mercy nuns – was acclaimed as much for its music education as for its academic outcomes.

Most of my school days were spent in schools in Brisbane run by the Sisters of Mercy and these women have had an enduringly positive and emboldening influence on me and many others, including the 'giant killer of Bennelong' Maxine McKew, an All Hallows' girl who recalled last May in an article in *The Australian Magazine*: 'If you want to look at those things that formed me, beyond my grandmother and Mary (mother), it's All Hallows', All Hallows' and

All Hallows'. A few months later, on election night 2007, the now Member for Bennelong applauded her school and the education she received from the Sisters of Mercy on national television.

What was it about this school and this order of nuns that so inspired generations of women? Was the key factor its founder who, in the early 1800s, set about creating 'walking nuns' who went out into the community looking after women, the disadvantaged and the sick, and who were self-regulatory rather than under the direction of the bishops?

Those days began in 1831 in Dublin, Ireland, when an idealistic, compassionate Irish heiress named Catherine McAuley was professed as a nun and appointed superior of the first House of Mercy, which she had established some years earlier with her inheritance. This was a new order of a different kind – emancipatory, with a focus on women: 'the Instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and the protection of distressed women of

ood character'. This was not the
olitary, cloistered life dedicated to
rayer; rather, a brave new order
f 'walking nuns' ministering
o those they viewed as being in
eed. The newly professed superior
ought and won from the bishops
large degree of self-regulation,
.ncommon in a hierarchy-bound
eligion governed at every level by
ale celibate leaders.

As McAuley defined the
ercy mission: "The Sisters shall
eel convinced that no work of
harity can be more productive
f good to society, or conducive
o the happiness of the poor than
he careful instruction of women,
ince whatever be the station they
re destined to fill, their example
nd advice will always possess
fluence, and where ever a religious

woman presides, peace and good
order are generally to be found.'

The portrait painted of Catherine
McAuley is of a focused, intelligent
and strategic woman leader whose
stewardship of the House of Mercy
saw its rapid expansion and the
eventual emigration of nuns to Perth
in 1846.

Fifteen years later, seven nuns
under the leadership of Mother
Vincent Whitty arrived in the then
colonial wild town of Brisbane. The
amazing Mother Vincent, described
by her biographer Sister Mary
Xaverius O'Donoghue as a 'woman
and educator in a masculine
society', had at the time of her
death thirty-one years later a team
of more than two hundred sisters
in twenty-six schools with seven
thousand pupils, and impressively,



Image: Mercy Nuns and Postulants, Glanmire Railway Station, Ireland, 1946. The photograph was taken on the day they left for Brisbane. / Courtesy Mercy Archives, Brisbane.

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had begun secondary education for girls in Queensland at All Hallows' fifty years before the first state high school was built.

These nuns continued on a steeply upward trajectory and were constantly in spirited, even combative, conversation with governments, the Catholic Church and community leaders about how to leverage funds to support their mission. They were tenacious, strategic and community-focused. By the early twentieth century, they had created the first Mater Hospital, which was joined in subsequent years by the Mater Public, Mater Children's, Mater Mothers' and Mater Adult. The pulling power of the fundraising Mater Art Unions became legendary, with countless Queenslanders eschewing the ritual visit to the beach in preference to viewing Mater Prize Homes. These nuns and their supporters were unrelenting in their approaches to government for a share of health funding. They had innate entrepreneurial and business skills – they were the feminists of their time, women who could accomplish anything in a male-dominated society.

In addition to the burgeoning and successful Mercy schools and hospitals, the order opened Catholic orphanages in the 1880s – St Vincent's at Nudgee in Brisbane and St Joseph's at Neerkol in Rockhampton. The nuns assigned

to the orphanages were under-prepared and untrained to cope with very young, neglected and displaced babies and children. Just how despairing some of these nuns felt about their time in the orphanages is captured in comments one sister made to the 1999 Forde Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions: 'I didn't know what an orphanage was, never seen one ... None of us had training in child development as we understand it today ... there wasn't much of it around at the time ... There were no psychologists around, we didn't understand psychology. I went racing around gobbling up books from anyone who would talk to me about it because I had no idea what to do, no idea at all ... I remember walking into the little girls' dormitory one night and stopped to speak to one, or someone had been sick or something, and I stopped at one bed. The next thing I knew I had sixty little girls on top of me and that was the tragedy of the place. I just said to someone else at the time, "My God, where are their mothers?" You know, these little girls were starved so if you touched one they were all on for a hug, you know, you couldn't hug sixty a night, one person.'

Although many children at the Mercy orphanages remember staff who were compassionate and

nd to them, and are appreciative of the care they received, others member severe discipline, acute loneliness, a lack of love and respect, and even sexual abuse by those who failed in their responsibilities to the vulnerable children in their care. The shocking revelations of the Forde Inquiry that a known sexual offender, a priest, was sent to a nunnery orphanage and continued to abuse young boys there despite complaints by children to staff, reverberated throughout the church and its communities. It was a priest, however, who collected the evidence, confronted the bishop and demanded the priest be removed. As one nun said: 'God help us – the priest had done the damage, and nobody took notice of the children because they thought they were telling lies, dreaming, imagining things.'

only became aware of the Mercy order's extensive influence in Queensland long after school. When I was in primary school, I was certain that there were three genders: men, women and 'nuns, brothers and priests'. This myth fizzled one morning when I wandered round the back of the convent to my piano lesson and saw a Hills Hoist stoned with female underwear. It was a cathartic moment: I realised that underneath the long black serge habits, starched gamps and veils was ordinary underwear for familiar human shapes.

During my All Hallows' days, I studied eight subjects for Junior; seven of them were taught by a pint-sized Irish nun who had had limited schooling herself and absolutely no spoken facility in French. Yet four of us got eight As in the external state exam – although I spent years reforming my Irish-brogue French accent. The same diminutive nun gave us our only sex talk just before we moved to the senior school for the final two years. We were riveted – the advice, in her Irish brogue, went something like this: 'Girls, when you're about twenty-five and about to go out with young men, never ever eat meat, because meat brings out the animal passion in ye ...' Naïve as we were, the sheer absurdity of this proposition was clear – although the boarders claimed that on evenings when school dances were held with boys' schools they were only allowed to eat fish.

Passage to the senior school was accompanied by dramatic changes within the Catholic Church. Those of us still at All Hallows' saw the impact of Vatican II up close. One Monday morning, the nuns were transformed – ankles, wrists, very white necks, ears and foreheads appeared, and most unimaginably, forelocks of hair. These locks all appeared to be the same shade of light brown. We speculated that the pharmacies of Brisbane had been emptied of all 'mission brown'

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bottles of hair dye in preparation for the literal unveiling. Gone were the mysterious gamps, clacking rosary beads and heavy habits – there was a perceptible lightness in our nuns' gait and the Mercy order and the women in it were forever changed. Suddenly, relationships changed also. These women had family names, like us, and families. Gone were the anonymity and the silence. We accompanied our nuns to weep and smile our way through *The Sound of Music*, and later heard nuns hum 'Edelweiss' in the hallways.

It was only after I left All Hallows' that I realised the impact of those emancipated women (emancipated nun is probably an oxymoron for most) as I devoured Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, took part in the political demonstrations of the day and embraced feminism. Eventually I learnt more about the nuns who taught me and their compelling narratives. A photo snapped on a railway platform in 1946 shows a group of twenty-three-year-old women, twenty-three professed Mercy nuns and two postulants, leaving Ireland (they thought forever) to join the first wave of postwar migration to Brisbane.

Three of these nuns taught me: Sister Mary Ursula (Ursula Markham), Sister Mary Benignus (Mary Johnson) and Mother Brendan (Mamie Daly). They are in their eighties now, but I am still in contact

with them. Mother Brendan became a close family friend some years after her arrival in Brisbane, but was only sixteen when she was first recruited in Ireland. In 1939, as the clouds of war were gathering over Europe, she was waiting for news from Dublin about her imminent departure to join a French order. Her decision to do so was twofold: she 'felt sorry' for the recruiters who regularly descended on Catholic Schools in Ireland to encourage young women to join religious orders and, keen for adventure, she wanted to go abroad. When the Sisters of St Paul of Chartres addressed her class, Brendan's hand shot up without hesitation: she was willing to enter the order.

With her postulant's dresses sewn and packed, she then began the long wait for the news of her posting. Eventually a postcard arrived requesting information about her arrival by train in Dublin, and she was buoyed with excitement. This was short-lived; later that day a telegram arrived. It was stamped 'URGENT' and contained the alarming words 'DO NOT COME. HITLER HAS INVADED FRANCE.' That seemed to be the end of her dream to go abroad.

She then spent the six war years training to become a nun in Timoleague in West Cork until she and the sisters in the photo received the call to go abroad – to Australia.

The photograph was taken the morning they left Glanmire Railway station to join the troopship, which was leaving from London. Fifteen of the nuns squeezed into one cabin. Soldiers, war brides and young children crammed into the others. "There was no entertainment whatsoever, no games, no nothing." The nuns were asked to take the children for an hour or two every day to 'give the mothers a rest' and both Brendan and Mary Johnson (who later taught me mathematics) set about educating some of the youngest postwar immigrants: "We had a class each of toddlers and we had to entertain them. We did not leave the boat until we got to Perth."

Brendan then taught in Mercy schools in Queensland and at Mercy missions in New Guinea. He also looked after retired nuns in a Mercy orphanage in Brisbane. Her experiences were mixed: "The early days were hard with the strict silence from 9 am on. If you broke the silence, you would have to come out and accuse yourself. One day a nun came out and accused herself of 'breach of promise', and we all nearly collapsed. They were very lonely times, especially at Christmas. The Australian sisters went home for the day, but we had no one to go to. That was the time we missed home most. When I left Ireland in 1946, the Church required that we renounce going home. When we were told that, it didn't

bother us much then because we were so excited about getting on the boat at least. So I was twenty-three years out here in Australia before I got home. And I went home to Ireland in 1968 and I'll never forget it – it was cold and bleak and there were grey skies pressing down on our shoulders and they said afterwards to me: "All you spoke about were the blue skies and the winter skies in Australia!"

"My first permanent job was in Warwick to teach home science," Brendan recalled. "I said: 'I can't teach home science – I don't even know what it is!'" She taught there for four years and was then transferred with no warning to teach in Brisbane's West End. She always wanted to assist in the New Guinea missions and volunteered often, but was not chosen. Then, with only six weeks' notice, she was called up. By this stage, Brendan and my mother – who had before marriage converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism in order to marry my father – had become firm friends. My mother missed her greatly, as Brendan assisted with other conversions. I clearly remember Brendan's accounts of the paradoxes she encountered in New Guinea, and the increasing numbers of frightening carved masks that began to appear on our walls at home. My mother would pack huge parcels of Easter eggs and food parcels at Christmas off

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to remote tropical outposts, and Brendan would despatch more of the intimidating, carved images of male tribal warriors.

During the twelve years she spent there (in full habit, despite the heat and the mud), teaching was her life and getting girls educated a personal mission: 'For a long time they wouldn't send girls to school beyond grade three. Anyway we fought for that and we kept at them and we got it eventually.' Back in Brisbane, she was assigned to look after retired nuns at St Vincent's orphanage for seven years. 'I used to cry like mad because I had no school to go to. They did have a school at St Vincent's, but at that stage the children were going out to the local parish schools. Then they wouldn't take any more orphans because most of them went to foster care, but after a while they were back in again if they were in trouble – that was the sad part, some of them got good homes and others didn't; some of them were treated like slaves. I remember reading an account of a boy who went to a farm outside Warwick and he couldn't stand it – they nearly killed him making him do everything and he was only fourteen. So he came back to the orphanage – a lot of them came back to the orphanage. I was then Superior for a number of years

in various places and then I retired to the Cottages at Nudgee – there were two rooms with our own ensuite and it was heaven – though the other (non-religious) retirees said it was full of nun talk!

Brendan and the young women who accompanied her to Brisbane in 1946 are all now in their mid-eighties – some are retired, some are still active in their ministries. These women made a huge impact on the young women they taught and cared for, as Maxine McKew said in her maiden speech in Parliament on February 14, 2008: 'Part of what I care about – friendship, beauty and the life of the mind – was nurtured by my teachers at All Hallows' Convent ... the older I get the more I appreciate that I was taught by women, by lay and religious staff, who seemed to me to know what was worth knowing. When one considers the deep provincialism of Queensland during this period, this seems extraordinary.'

It is nearly one hundred and fifty years since the Mercy Sisters arrived in Queensland – the novitiates may have closed for want of young women to enter the Order, but the legacy of the mission lives on, not only in those who experienced the Sisters first hand but also in their schools, hospitals and Church communities. ■

Footnotes and references available online at www.griffithreview.com

Marilyn McMeniman attended Mercy convents, including All Hallows' Convent, from 1957 to 1965. She is Pro Vice Chancellor (Arts, Education and Law) at Griffith University and was Dean of Education.