



‘I am building a house’: Nano Nagle’s Georgian convents

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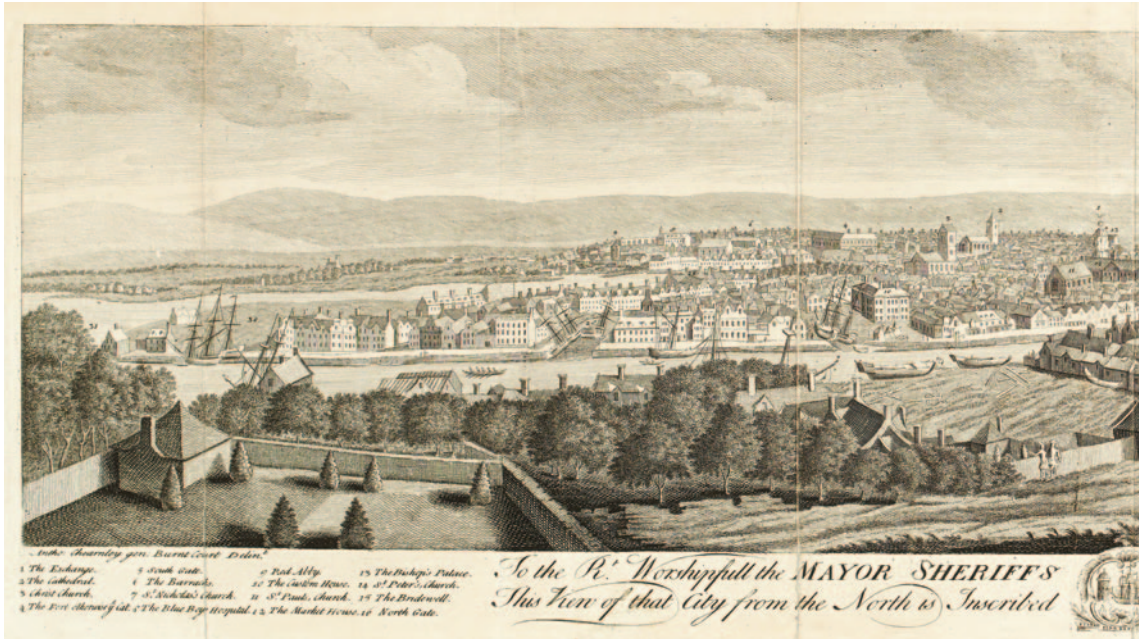
LOOKING UP MARY STREET FROM CORK’S SOUTH QUAYS, A FOUR-STOREY GEORGIAN building can be glimpsed, tucked away discreetly in the middle of a triangular plot as if trying to avoid notice. In an Ireland that has often associated noteworthy Georgian architecture with the Big House, it has largely succeeded, yet it is a building with a remarkable story. Built by Nano Nagle between 1769 and 1771 for the Ursuline Order, the South Presentation Convent (as it is known today) was the first purpose-built convent in Georgian Ireland.¹

The Nagles were a wealthy Catholic family who owned large amounts of property in Cork city and county. Nano Nagle was born in Ballygriffin, near Mallow, in 1718, but spent much of her youth and early adulthood on the Continent, where she was educated (Plate 1).² She returned to Ireland following the death of her father in 1746, and moved to Cork to live with her brother Joseph in the late 1740s or early 1750s, after the deaths of her mother and sister. By the mid-eighteenth century, Cork was thriving, thanks in part to Catholic involvement in the exporting of butter, salted beef and pork (Plate 2).³ The city, described by one visitor as one of the richest and most commercial in Europe, was also a place of great poverty, and behind the grand façades was ‘the dullest and dirtiest town which can be imagined ... one is stopped every minute by ... hideous troops of beggars, or pigs which run the streets.’⁴ Nagle straddled both versions of Cork. Though her family was very wealthy, she rejected the luxuries such wealth could bring and devoted herself to the education of poor Catholic girls in the city.

The latter half of the eighteenth century saw the rapid expansion of the city, with marshes on the eastern and western ends of the established areas of Cork reclaimed for development and bearing the names of the families who first constructed buildings along these new streets, with Pike’s Marsh and Hammond’s Marsh to the west, and Dunscombe’s Marsh to the east (Plate 3).⁵ Large, multiple-storey terraced houses, many

1 – Eighteenth-century portrait believed to be Nano Nagle (artist unknown)

(courtesy Presentation Sisters, South Presentation Convent, Cork, on permanent loan from the family of James Nagle Healy; photo: Karen Horton)



2 – Thomas Chambers, engraving of Cork, 1750
published in Charles Smith, HISTORY OF THE COUNTY AND CITY OF CORK (Cork, 1750)
(courtesy National Library of Ireland)

3 – John Rocque, detail of MAP OF CORK CITY, 1773
with location of Nano Nagle's first convent indicated (courtesy Cork City Library)





with an aspect across the river, were developed in these new areas, and quickly became fashionable addresses for the merchant classes. However, the southern side of the city, where Nagle lived, developed at a different pace. It was not affected by the reclamation of marshes or the expansion of the commercial city centre. Located along the south bank of the River Lee, in an area outside the core of the medieval city, the South Parish was an older suburb with a history of ecclesiastical establishments, beginning in the seventh century with the monastic settlement of St Finbarr (located near the current St Finbarr's Cathedral).⁶ By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the area was becoming increasingly residential. John Rocque's earliest map of Cork city (1759) depicts the South Parish as a residential area on the southern periphery, surrounded by extensive gardens, but the area retained an ecclesiastical character with a number of churches and the remnants of the thirteenth-century former Augustinian foundation known as the Red Abbey.⁷ The construction of a new Catholic chapel in 1766, now known as St Finbarr's South, and of the Capuchin Friary chapel on Blackamoor Lane in 1771 indicates an increasing Catholic population in this rapidly expanding suburb (Plate 4).⁸

The Nagle family owned property across Cork city. Nano's uncle Joseph lived in Dundanion, Blackrock, and her brother David lived on the South Mall, which was developing as the main business street of the Georgian city, but her brother Joseph chose to live on land the family owned around Cove Lane (now Cove Street) located in the South Parish, and it was his home that was Nano's first residence in the city.⁹ In the mid-eighteenth century, topographer and historian Charles Smith noted the relative poverty of this south suburb, observing that 'In this part the poorer sort of the inhabitants dwell. Their



4 – Present-day view of the South Presentation Convent, from the north, with its associated sandstone chapel and former alms house, and red-brick school building. The tower of the former Augustinian Friary and the eighteenth-century South Chapel can be seen in the foreground. (courtesy Cork City Council; photo: Jim McCarthy)

doors are thronged with children.¹⁰ It was in this area that Nano Nagle opened her first school, on the street now known as Douglas Street (then Cove Lane), to cater for the children Smith described.

Many of Cork's merchant class never intended to settle in the city. The French consul, Charles Etienne Coquebert de Montbret, noted on a visit to Cork in 1790 that Cork was a place 'where men go to make money, but where they would have no desire to live out their lives'.¹¹ Certainly this seems true of the Nagles, as by the early 1760s both David and Joseph Nagle had moved to Bath, a town described by John Beresford in 1795 as a little Dublin to an Irishman.¹² Despite her brothers' departure, Nano Nagle remained

in the city. In some ways this is extraordinary: as an unmarried woman in her forties, she would have been expected to move with her family, but by the 1760s she was deeply embedded in charitable and educational work in the city. Because of the penal laws forbidding Catholic involvement in education, it was necessary, as she later recalled, to keep her school 'a profound secret, as I knew, if it were spoken of, I should meet with opposition on every side'.¹³ She did not succeed in keeping it from her family for long, but despite their initial reservations both her brother Joseph and her uncle, also Joseph, became firm supporters of her religious and educational project. Indeed, the financial support of her family was vital both to the expansion of the schools and the building of the convent on Douglas Street.¹⁴

The success of her first school was beyond anything Nagle had anticipated.¹⁵ Within sixteen months she was educating over four-hundred children, and by 1769 was running seven schools in Cork city.¹⁶ She soon recognised that it was impossible for this work to be reliant on one woman. She was also frequently dissatisfied with the lay teachers she employed, and 'prudently foresaw that a work of this extensive charity could not long exist, unless the persons charged with the instruction considered it as a duty, and attended to it, not for a salary, but from motives of religion and zeal for God's glory'.¹⁷ A practical solution to this problem seemed to be to encourage an established order of teaching nuns to set up a foundation in Ireland.¹⁸

NANO NAGLE'S FIRST CONVENT

ESTABLISHED BY ANGELA MERICI IN 1535 IN BRESCIA, ITALY, THE URSULINES WERE the first modern teaching order.¹⁹ Given Nagle's focus on education, they were, in some ways, an obvious choice, though there were potential difficulties in marrying Nagle's vision with the Ursulines'. Initially an order dedicated to educating girls in the community, from 1612 they took solemn vows and were forbidden from travelling beyond their convent enclosure. This approach clashed with Nagle's vision for a teaching order in Cork.²⁰ In addition, despite their initial focus on educating the daughters of the poor, by the eighteenth century the Ursulines' priority was educating the daughters of wealthy Catholics.²¹

Negotiations to bring the Ursulines to Cork began in 1767, and were led by Fr Francis Moylan, then Vicar General for the Diocese of Cork, who assured the Ursulines in Paris that a convent would be built for them.²² Though Nagle certainly supported Moylan's campaign to bring the Ursulines to Ireland, she did not always see eye to eye with the Catholic hierarchy and challenged them on more than one occasion in pursuit of her goal.²³ John Butler, Bishop of Cork, wanted Nagle to seek permission from the Cork Protestant establishment before embarking on building a convent, arguing that it would be best if 'we had the Protestants' consent'. She refused, observing that her first schools had been established secretly as if she had told her family they would have forbidden the project and 'I should not have had a school in Cork'.²⁴ She maintained that if she asked

for permission to build and open the convent, there would be objections, but if it was presented as a *fait accompli* it had a greater chance of being accepted.

Following protracted negotiations with Moylan, the Ursulines consented to train four Irish women at their convent on Rue St Jacques in Paris. These women would then move to the new convent in Cork. The construction of the convent began in 1769 or 1770. Nagle leased a plot located between Evergreen Street and Douglas Street, which had previously been owned by her uncle Joseph.²⁵ The plot, '60 foot in breadth and 200 feet in length', is described as bounding 'on the South with Upper Douglas Road [now Evergreen Street] and on the north with lower Douglas Road [now Douglas Street]'.²⁶ In 1768, Nano Nagle reclaimed this plot from Isabella Harper,

in addition to all that house and garden situate on the lower road leading from Cork to Douglas bounded on the one side by Ann Robbins holding and on the other side by the widow Bananes holding both which said demised premises are situate in the parish of St John of Jerusalem in the south suburbs of Cork.²⁷

Bringing the Ursulines to Cork was an expensive venture. Nagle estimated that she spent between £4,000 and £5,000 on the Ursuline foundation.²⁸ Having invested so much of her own personal fortune in the project, she closely followed the progress of the building and did not shy away from visiting the site while the construction works were underway. In September 1770 she wrote to Eleanor Fitzsimons, one of the women training at the



5 – John Rocque, *MAP OF CORK CITY, 1773*, detail showing the first building on the South Presentation Convent site

This building formed the nucleus of a site which expanded over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to include the majority of the ground located within the distinctive triangular plot. (courtesy Cork City Library)

Ursuline Convent in Paris, that 'one could not imagine a house so lately built that the walls would be so dry as they are ... You will find it very habitable this winter, which I did not think it would be.'²⁹ Under pressure to complete the convent in time for the Ursulines' expected arrival in late 1770, Nagle expended a considerable amount of money paying labourers a day rate through the short days of the winter months. However, without informing either Nagle or Moylan, the Ursulines delayed travelling to Ireland. The week before Christmas 1770, an exasperated Nagle wrote to Fitzsimons, observing that if she had been told of the change of plan she could have avoided the additional expense 'at a time when I had many calls for money and employed workmen in short days, which makes work come out vastly dear'.³⁰ Determined not to waste money unnecessarily again, she 'was resolved not to buy what could be had in a few hours and at farthest in a few days, I should have put myself to very unnecessary expense, which I am determined not to do till you are landed'. Clearly concerned with managing her finances sensibly at a time when she was funding not only the convent building project but also schools across the city, Nagle suspended further works on the new building until the Ursulines arrival.

Nagle's practical approach explains why, when the four newly professed Ursulines arrived in Cork in early May 1771, they found the new convent incomplete. They 'were received by Miss Nagle, and lodged in a small house in Douglas Street, at a little distance, but within the enclosure of their new residence'.³¹ Nagle's own house is likely to have been 'that house and garden situate on the lower road', described in the lease she took from Isabella Harper in 1768.³² After the convent was completed and the Ursulines took possession on 18th September 1771, Nagle remained living in this house within the Ursuline enclosure for a further nine years, visiting the convent regularly and devoting time to the religious instruction of the boarders every Saturday.³³

The plot of land on which Nano Nagle built the Ursuline Convent was long and narrow, orientated north-south. Taking a measurement of the 200ft in length recorded in the lease, the plot on which the first convent was constructed stops short of Douglas Street and, in terms of the breadth of 60ft, just accommodates the building. The building can be seen on Rocque's map of 1773, which indicates a substantial detached building set back off Evergreen Street towards the northern end of a narrow plot (Plate 5). Given the political conditions of the time, the location of the convent deep in the site is understandable.³⁴ The main entrance door to the convent, which is still retained, was accessed by way of a series of steps from Douglas Street below (Plate 7), indicating an association with the other property Nagle owned on this street (Plate 6). There was no formal gateway or entrance to the convent from Douglas Street, and a high wall ran along the boundary with Evergreen Street to the south, an arrangement which continues to this day.³⁵

The convent Nagle built for the Ursulines was a modest building of five bays and three storeys with a dormer attic. A chapel was built on the first floor, where a small holy water font was inserted into the shouldered architrave (Plate 8). The principal rooms had fireplaces, with chimneys placed at the gable ends of the building, and were lit by two windows. Most of the cells on the upper floors where the Ursulines slept did not have an





*7 – Steps leading from the convent building down to Douglas Street
The characteristic changes of level and profusion of steps result from the steeply inclined site.*

*opposite 6 – Exterior of the South Presentation Convent showing the front (north) elevation of the original convent building built by Nano Nagle for the Ursuline Sisters
The main entrance door can be seen at the top of the steps on the right. The extensions to both sides were added later by the Ursulines to accommodate expanding numbers. (courtesy Presentation Sisters, South Presentation Convent, Cork)*



8 – First floor of the original convent building showing lugged architraves to the eighteenth-century raised and fielded panel doors

9 – Small cupboard below the windowsills in the cells of the convent building

10 – Original ironmongery retained on a cell door

The small butterfly hinges on the opening hatch and the longer strap hinges are preserved on many of the doors on the upper floors of the original convent building.

opposite

11 – Staircase in the convent Nagle built for the Ursulines

Despite minor alterations, the original staircase is largely preserved, including the simple balustrade with drop handrails.

12 – Typical sheeted-timber cell door with distinctive opening hatch in the upper section





open fire. They were small and generally lit by one window. Each of these cells had a cupboard fitted beneath the windowsill, with two doors hung on butterfly hinges (Plate 9). The original staircase to the building has survived and is located centrally to the rear of the building. Retained from ground to third-floor (or former attic) level, the staircase is a timber closed-well stair, with narrowly spaced, simple spindles and a wide, moulded timber handrail (Plate 11). A change in style of handrail on the top floor indicates that the original dormer attic of the house was later raised to full height and an extra floor added. Other original features include the doors of the main reception rooms to the first floor, which have six raised and fielded panels and shouldered architraves. A number of these rooms also have wide run plaster cornices, while the sheeted doors of the cells to the top floors also survive (Plate 12). Many of the original strap hinges remain on the doors, as do the small butterfly hinges on the opening hatches of the upper portion of each cell door (Plate 10), a curious feature found in all the bedrooms of this building, and possibly designed to allow ventilation through the small cells (Plate 12). These small architectural details have preserved much of the character of the convent.

Nagle was very involved in the building process despite the secretive conditions in which she was forced to make these preparations. She wrote to Eleanor Fitzsimons:

And when you are settled there, I shall be to blame if I don't get every necessary that is thought wanting, as there is nothing in my power I shan't endeavour to do.

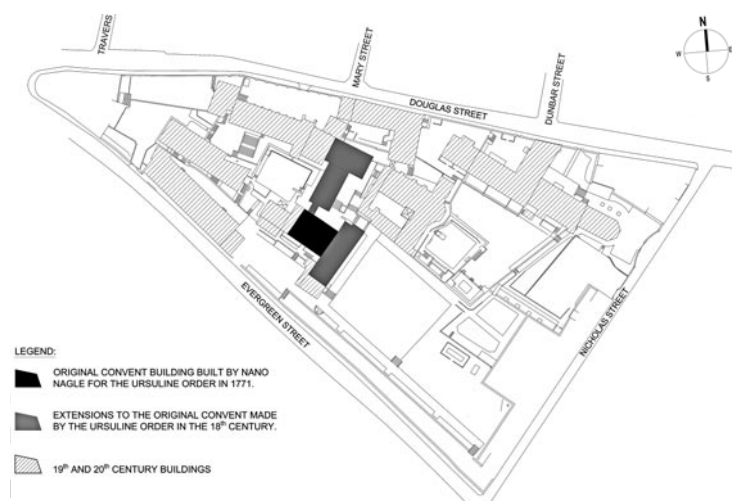
And I hope you'll be so good as to excuse, in the beginning, all, and consider we are in a country [in which] we can't do as we please.³⁶

The possibility of falling foul of the penal laws was a constant worry for Nagle, whether it was in relation to her schools or her convents. Indeed, on the day the Ursulines moved into their new convent, Nagle signed an agreement signalling her intent to continue financially supporting the fledging community, but noting that she would first have to consult 'some counsel learn'd in the law' in order to 'guard against penal laws'.³⁷ Discretion was clearly key.³⁸ But, despite its unobtrusive position, the new Ursuline Convent didn't go unnoticed. A letter in the *Freeman's Journal* in February 1772 complained that

we have had nuns brought in from the Continent to preside at, and conduct a nunnery lately built here; in this seminary they mean to receive the children of Protestants for tuition; and you may judge of the principles they are likely to imbibe from their teachers, who will lose no pains to seduce and make converts of the young and weak minds committed to their care.³⁹

Some members of the trade guilds in Cork also objected to the convent, and called for the suppression of both Nagle's convent and schools. However, Francis Carleton, a city sheriff and later Mayor of Cork, argued that if the convent and schools were closed then the daughters of Cork's Catholic mercantile class would be sent to the Continent for education, thus spending their money abroad rather than at home. He retorted that the Protestants of Cork had nothing to fear from 'pious ladies who chose to live together, say their beads and drink tea'.⁴⁰

The Ursulines flourished in Cork. In January 1772 they opened their school and took in twelve boarders.⁴¹ The convent too began to thrive. Wealthy Catholics were pleased to see their daughters enter the convent, and the size of Nagle's original building quickly proved inadequate. The Ursuline Annals for 1772 record that 'toward the close of this year, a large addition was begun to be built to the first house — or, rather, a second



13 – Site plan of the South Presentation Convent indicating the surviving eighteenth-century convent buildings (courtesy JCA Architects)

house communicating with it.’⁴² Nagle noted that no-one else contributed a farthing until the Ursulines began ‘their new building and chapel’.⁴³ Account books for this period indicate that the majority of the funds for this building project came from within the Ursuline Order, although Nagle is recorded as having lent £60 towards the cost in 1775.⁴⁴ The extension to the original building contained cells, an infirmary, a chapel, church and choir (see Plates 6, 7). This building work took several years, and an entry in the Ursuline Annals for April 1776 records the first ceremony held in the choir and notes that the new house, or addition to the first house, was not completed until this year (Plate 13).⁴⁵

THE FIRST PRESENTATION CONVENT

DESPITE THE SUCCESS OF HER URSULINE FOUNDATION, NANO NAGLE WAS DISAPPOINTED. The Presentation Annals suggest that Nagle was unaware that the Ursulines’ rule of enclosure would prevent them from taking over all her schools, and argued that Moylan deliberately brought the Ursulines to Cork to teach wealthy Catholic girls: ‘Little did Miss Nagle suspect ... that these Ursulines were intended by Doctor Moylan for the education of young Ladies, and not to be devoted to the only and great object which she had in view, viz the instruction of the poor.’⁴⁶ The Ursuline Annals substantiate this account, noting that

... her views were rather disappointed than fulfilled as soon as she discovered that the Ursulines were bound by the Ursuline constitution to enclosure and the education of the higher orders of society, consequently could not, as she wished, devote themselves solely to the instruction of the poor.⁴⁷

It is odd that this seems to have come as a surprise to Nagle as she is likely to have been aware of the restrictions of their constitution, but, alongside their schools for wealthy Catholic girls, the Ursulines often established a school for poor girls, and perhaps Nagle thought that would satisfy her needs in Cork. Whatever her expectations, the reality was that, far from taking control of all that Nagle had established, the Ursulines could only run the one school located within their enclosure.

It was crucial to the survival of Nagle’s city schools to find educators who were at liberty to teach children outside the confines of a religious enclosure, so Nagle decided that her only option was to establish her own order. This decision may have been prompted by the existence of *Quamvis Iusto*, a decree issued by Pope Benedict XIV in 1749. This confirmed the right of bishops to control convents in their diocese, but it also allowed for unenclosed convents to continue to function (very often against the express wishes of the local bishop who wanted the nuns to be more firmly under his control). In essence, *Quamvis Iusto* ended the necessity for nuns to operate only as enclosed orders, and, after the disappointment of her Ursuline experiment, Nano Nagle became one of the first to take advantage of it.⁴⁸

On Christmas Eve 1775, Nano Nagle, Elizabeth Burke, Mary Fouhy and Mary Anne Collins began their novitiate, and on 24th June 1777 all four made their religious profession in the presence of the Bishop of Cork.⁴⁹ Initially called the Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and later the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Nagle's foundation was the first Irish order to be founded since the Reformation. The exact location of the convent Nagle built for her new order is unknown, but it appears to have been on Douglas Street, just north-east of the boundary of the Ursuline Convent.⁵⁰ This decision to build so close to the Ursuline Convent prompted a clash with Moylan and the Ursuline sisters. There may have been fears that two convents so close to each other might attract unwanted attention from the authorities, but it is more likely that Moylan saw Nagle's new foundation as providing unwanted competition for potential novices. So frustrated was Moylan by Nagle's refusal to build her convent on the other side of the city that, while building was in progress, he met her at the site and 'threatened to have what was erected of the building destroyed'. Nagle refused, arguing 'that if he was pleased to drive her thence, she would never pursue her intended object in Cork; but, would retire to some other part of Ireland, where, she should meet with no opposition, and more encouragement'. Moylan withdrew his opposition and remained, ever after, silent on the subject and the convent was built.⁵¹ At the time, Nagle was a lay-woman, and although Moylan was the parish priest of South Parish, he had no power to dictate where she built the convent. It may have been this dispute that Bishop Coppinger referred to in his short biography of Nano Nagle, published a decade after her death: 'selfish, narrow, envious machinations from a quarter where they could not be supposed to originate'. He also noted, without identifying anyone, that '[Nagle] has been charged with having squandered her money upon the building of houses for the sole purpose of getting a name'.⁵² Clearly, despite all her precautions, Nagle's projects did at times attract unwanted attention.

Construction work on the convent building for Nano Nagle's new Presentation Order was underway when she wrote to Teresa Mulally in August 1777: 'I am building a house, and when it will be fit to inhabit I believe young ladies that have fortunes will join.'⁵³ It is clear from this statement that Nagle did not feel that her current modest home on Douglas Street, within the grounds of the Ursuline Convent, would attract the same class of novice to her new order.⁵⁴ Her decision to build a new convent worthy of 'young ladies that have fortunes' was an expensive undertaking at a time when her finances had not yet recovered from providing the Ursulines with their Irish foundation. Despite an annual income estimated at £600, she was regularly short of money.⁵⁵ This may have been in part because, in addition to building the convent for the Ursulines, she also provided them with a further £2,000 as an endowment, but also because she remained financially responsible for the schools she had established.⁵⁶ She wrote to Mulally in August of the following year: 'the building I under[took] at a time I could not afford it, has much perplexed me to get money to go on it. In my opinion a person that has the name of a fortune [is] the most unfit person to undertake any foundation, except they can themselves

support it.⁵⁷ As with the Ursuline Convent, Nano Nagle encountered unforeseen complications which delayed the completion of her new building, and so was forced to remain living in her small house just west of the new site. She had hoped to have moved to the new convent by Christmas 1779, but was prevented from doing so by the dismantling of the boundary wall, which she was obliged to allow in order to provide access for carts carrying stone for the construction of a new garden wall at the Ursuline Convent, which shared a boundary with her new establishment. She wrote to Mullaly: 'I did not leave my old habitation, as I could not have the back part of our house exposed, it was not safe to venture.'⁵⁸ The issue of safety was a real one. Nagle had thought little of her own safety in the early years, and there are accounts of her returning to her house late at night guided only by a small lantern. However, when putting her new foundation on a more formal footing, the safety of the nuns was obviously a concern. The area around Douglas Street was not a particularly safe one. Newspapers regularly reported on robberies and assaults in the area, many of them associated with the soldiers in the two nearby barracks.⁵⁹ A number of murders also occurred in the area.⁶⁰ One, in 1781, was of a soldier, and his regiment retaliated the following day with 'wanton outrages upon the persons and inhabitants' of the area.⁶¹ There was also evidence of Whiteboy support in the lanes around Douglas Street. Indeed, in the mid 1780s, two women on Cove Lane 'were drying gunpowder in a pot ... over the fire. One of them, blowing under the pot, drove a spark of fire into the powder which immediately blew up, unroofed the house and burnt the women.'⁶²

Political events in Britain delayed Nagle's move even further. When the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots broke out in London in 1780, Nagle feared that the same 'contagious frenzy may break out in this kingdom', and this fear compelled her to continue her 'good works' without 'incurring any noise about it'. When she and the other sisters of her newly founded order did finally move to their new building on 15th July 1780, they did so in total secrecy. She recalled that 'we stole like thieves. I got up before three in the morning [and] had all our beds taken down and sent to the house, before any was up in the street.'⁶³

No part of Nano Nagle's first Presentation Convent survives, nor are any illustrative representations of it known. It was certainly a smaller convent than the one she had built for the Ursulines. Judging from the hearth money and window-tax payments listed in the convent account book, it appears that the convent had eight hearths and twelve windows (Plate 14).⁶⁴ There was also a small chapel, but the descriptions in the annals suggest a very modest building, which is unlikely to have displayed any ostentatious architectural features.⁶⁵ The Presentation Annals, written in the nineteenth century when the nuns had moved into the present convent on Douglas Street, are unsentimental about the first convent, referring to it as a 'low, small and ill-contrived building', which was 'small and inconvenient' with 'low and narrow' rooms.⁶⁶ An account book recording expenditure in Nagle's convent from 1781 records the payment of £26 on the 'building of a liney', a small, open-sided outdoor building (more often spelt 'linny' or 'linhay') which must have been located in the rear yard or garden. A considerable amount of money

An acc^t of what was expended, from 26 April 1802 to 26 April 1803.

Meat	83. 2. 6d
Bread	27. 17. 5
Butter	27. 6. 2
Fish & Eggs	16. 3. 3d
Roots	7. 11. 6
Salt vinegar, mustard, Pepper sand, matches, Oil, etc	3. 0. 1
Washing	4. 18. 1d
Soap, candles, starch & blue	9. 5. 2d
Milk	13. 8. 8
Tea & Sugar	42. 17. 2
Drink	31. 14. 8
Coals	16. 0. 12
Wine & breads for the Altar	3. 14. 5d
Grants for six sisters & Miss Tove	20. 6. 18
Pension to Mary Ann Cliffe	10. 0. 0
Pension to the Chaplain	30. 0. 0
Wages for Andrew Mahony	2. 10. 0
Painters & Glaziers work	3. 12. 1
Joiners work	1. 16. 2d
Plaster & Eye water for the Beer	2. 3. 9
Brushes Brooms & Cottons for the Kitchen	1. 5. 1d
Servants wages & Christmas Box	5. 0. 9
Garden Expenses	3. 14. 10d
Paper, Postage, Ink, soap &c	2. 12. 12d
Lamp Money	0. 13. 9
Reparth Arisey	0. 15. 2
Window Tax	1. 0. 2
City Rates	2. 14. 0
Minister Money of two years	2. 10. 6
Winning the Clock	0. 5. 5
	370. 9. 4

14 – Page from the 1802-03 account book of the Presentation Convent

opposite

15 – South Presentation Convent in the early twentieth century

By this time, Nano Nagle's original building had been extended by the Ursuline Order a number of times. This view shows the large extension constructed by the Ursulines in 1790 and later extended by a further two bays by the Presentation Order. The Presentation Sisters also built the small mortuary chapel in the garden, seen here but no longer extant.

(illus courtesy Presentation Sisters, South Presentation Convent, Cork)

(£4 to £5) was spent annually on the garden, despite the very limited finances of Nagle's new order, illustrating the importance of such an outdoor space to an order which, with the exception of teaching in their schools, was mainly confined to the convent. Nagle wrote in 1783: 'I have made a pretty garden and enclosed all the ground part of their house, which has cost a great deal [for] making the walls. We could not do well without it [to provide] some place to walk in, as nobody we receive will go out only to the chapel and to the schools.'⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

NANO NAGLE DIED IN APRIL 1784. SHE WAS A PIONEER IN MANY WAYS, SECURING THE education of thousands of poor Catholics in Cork. She built two convents, brought the Ursuline Sisters to Ireland, and founded her own order of nuns. Unlike her own convent, the convent she built for the Ursulines is still standing today, and among Cork's Georgian buildings it is both typical and unique – unique because it still retains its original purpose as a site of religious and educational use.⁶⁸

Although much altered and extended, the original Ursuline Convent remains at the heart of the site. The Ursulines extended the convent in the mid-1770s, and an even larger building was constructed in 1790, this time orientated to look east across the gardens

which were being laid out at this time (Plate15).⁶⁹ This building contained two refectories (one for the nuns and one for the boarders), school rooms, a large kitchen and an infirmary on the top floor. The architectural character of the building as it remains today, built on a steeply sloping site and comprising several additions to the original house, is described in an entry in the Ursuline Annals:

The circumstance of this Monastery having been thus built in distinct divisions, at different periods and on quite different plans, makes the whole building both irregular and highly inconvenient, abounding in stairs, passages, little alleys, doors and windows in all corners, which admit more wind than light.⁷⁰

In this respect, it is a building typical of Georgian Cork. The character of Cork's Georgian architecture is almost wilfully confused. The classical uniformity, seen in the terraces of cities such as Dublin or Edinburgh, makes only fleeting appearances in Cork. In this city, particularly in the areas developed in the mid-eighteenth century, buildings display widely varied proportions and façade compositions. Domestic structures are almost always constructed of rendered rubble stone, with the grander examples sometimes incorporating a cut-stone eaves cornice. There is no consistency of bays, even when the houses are built as part of a terrace. Many examples of the period have a steeply pitched roof, characteristic of buildings in the city centre. The individuality of the buildings of this period in Cork is summed up by the nineteenth-century historian John Windele:



The stranger will scarcely fail to observe, as one of the characteristics of the City, a general hatred of straight lines, as far as relates to continuity of buildings. In town and suburb it is all the same. Uniformity in the style, as well as height, of the houses in our streets, appears to have been a thing religiously to be eschewed.⁷¹

With their modest design and local, vernacular features, Nano Nagle's buildings – financed by her and constructed under her supervision – sat discretely within their surroundings in the South Parish of the eighteenth century.⁷² It is the circumstances of the construction, and the survival and continuous use of Nagle's original convent building, which make this site truly unique.

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Abbreviations UCB Ursuline Convent, Blackrock, Cork
 SPC South Presentation Convent, Cork

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Several convents were built in the seventeenth century for Franciscans, Dominicans and Benedictines, but these were generally short-lived. The convent in Channel Row, Dublin, was built for the Benedictine nuns in 1688-89, though they left after a year, and from 1717 it was taken over by Dominican nuns who remained there until 1808. Sr Mary Genevieve, 'Mrs Bellews family in Channel Row', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. 22, no. 3, October 1968, 232; Sinéad Gargan, 'How not to "Encourage people to take Lotts for Building": the eighteenth-century non-development of Grangegorman by the Monck estate', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, XVIII, 2015, 111; Mary O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800* (London, 2005) 196; Margaret McCurtain, *Women, Education and Learning in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991) 169; Bernadette Cunningham, "'Bethlehem": the Dillons and the Poor Clare convent at Ballinaclyffey, Co Westmeath', *Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement*, vol. 17, 2012-13, 5-10.
- ² She is likely to have been educated at the Benedictine Abbey at Ypres (where she also may have later been a postulant). Dame Bernard Stewart, Kylemore Abbey, to Sr Camillus Gavin, 5th March 1960, *Positio Super Virtutibus, Book I – the life and activity of the servant of God* (Rome, 1994) 199-200.
- ³ David Dickson, *Old World Colony: Cork and South Munster 1630-1830* (Cork, 2005) 149-169.
- ⁴ De Latocnaye, *A Frenchman's walk through Ireland, 1796-1797* (Belfast and Dublin, 1917) 73.
- ⁵ Charles Smith, *The Ancient and Present State of the County and City of Cork*, 2 vols ([1750] 1815) I, 401-02.
- ⁶ John Bradley and Andrew Halpin, 'The topographical development of Scandinavian and Anglo-Norman Cork', in Patrick O'Flanagan and Cornelius Buttimer (eds), *Cork: history and society*, (Dublin, 1993) 15-44.

- ⁷ The concentration of both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiastical sites is evident on Rocque's 1759 map, and additional religious buildings appear on Rocque's later map of 1773. However, not all of the religious buildings still standing in this area in the latter half of the eighteenth century were still in original use. St John's Chapel, a former Catholic chapel adjacent to the convent, was no longer in use, and the Red Abbey (located directly across the street from the South Presentation Convent site) had been in secular use since its dissolution in 1541. *Archaeological Inventory of County Cork, vol. 2: East and South Cork* (Dublin, 1994) 77.
- ⁸ When first constructed, this South Chapel, as it came to be known, was discreetly located at the end of a laneway (known as New Chapel Lane on Rocque's map of 1773) before the street was continued through to join Douglas Street in the nineteenth century.
- ⁹ *Positio*, 108. T.J. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin, 1959) 33. The family owned land in Cork city and county. In addition to land in Blackrock, they had property in Cove Lane, Mallow Lane, Fair Lane and Old Market Place in the north of the city. They also held land in Johnstown and Killahora, east of the city, and in Ballycureen south-west of the city. *Saunders's Newsletter*, 27th February 1782; 'Old Market Place, 1756', in Sr Mary Pius O'Farrell (ed.), *Breaking of Morn: Nano Nagle and Francis Moylan – a book of documents* (Cork, 2001) 40-41.
- ¹⁰ Smith, *Ancient and Present State*, 402.
- ¹¹ Quoted in David Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800* (2nd ed. Dublin, 2000) 133.
- ¹² Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 54; R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760-1801* (Oxford, 1979) 142-3.
- ¹³ Nano Nagle to Eleanor Fitzsimons, 17th July 1769, <https://ursulinesisters.omeka.net/items/show/21>. Although by the mid eighteenth century official repression of Catholic schools was rarely invoked, in theory Nagle could have been fined £20 or sentenced to three months in prison and the family's reputation would have been damaged. *An Act to Restrain Foreign Education*, 7 Will III, c.4 (1695), section 9, <http://library.law.umn.edu/irishlaw/education.html>; Rosemary Raughter, 'Pious occupations: female activism and the Catholic revival in eighteenth-century Ireland', in Rosemary Raughter (ed.), *Religious Women and their History* (Dublin, 2005), 26.
- ¹⁴ Nano Nagle to Eleanor Fitzsimons, 17th July 1769, claimed she did 'not expect a farthing from any mortal towards the support of my schools and I thought I should not have more than fifty or sixty girls', <https://ursulinesisters.omeka.net/items/show/21>. Deed of Trust after Joseph Nagle's Death, 2nd November 1759, *Positio*, 153-54.
- ¹⁵ Nagle to Fitzsimons, 17th July 1769, *ibid*.
- ¹⁶ One of the conditions of support from the Nagle family was that boys would be educated as well as girls, and so a school was opened which catered for forty boys. By 1769 she was running seven schools – two for boys and five for girls. Nagle to Fitzsimons, 17th July 1769, *ibid*.
- ¹⁷ Bishop Moylan to Archbishop Troy, 7th November 1788, in O'Farrell (ed.), *Breaking of Morn*, 117. Catherine Nowlan-Roebuck, 'The Presentation Order and National Education in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in Deirdre Raftery and Karin Fischer (eds), *Educating Ireland – schooling and social change, 1700-2000* (Dublin, 2014) 128.
- ¹⁸ There were nuns in eighteenth-century Ireland, including the Poor Clares, Carmelites and the Dominicans, who had established foundations in Ireland in 1629, 1640 and 1644, but these were primarily contemplative orders. Where they were involved in education it was for wealthy Catholics. Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1998) 36, 48; O'Dowd, *History of Women in Ireland*, 196-97.
- ¹⁹ Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, 45.
- ²⁰ Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns – women, religion and cultural change*

- in Ireland, 1750-1900* (Oxford, 1998) 7; McCurtain, *Women, Education and Learning*, 168.
- ²¹ Nowlan-Roebuck, 'The Presentation Order and National Education', 128.
- ²² Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns*, 16-17.
- ²³ Raughter, 'Pious occupations', 26.
- ²⁴ Nagle to Fitzsimons, 20th July 1770, <https://ursulinesisters.omeka.net/items/show/11>.
- ²⁵ The Ursuline nuns paid £9 10d ground rent annually to the Nagle family up until 1801 when the payment was reduced to a token sum. Joseph Nagle to Bishop Moylan, 31st August 1801, *Positio*, 467.
- ²⁶ Indenture between Joseph Nagle and John Harper, 16th September 1720, in O'Farrell (ed.), *Breaking of Morn*, 29.
- ²⁷ Indenture between Isabella Harper (widow of John Harper) and Nano Nagle, 23rd December 1768 in O'Farrell (ed.), *idid.*, 56.
- ²⁸ Nano Nagle to Teresa Mulally, 24th August 1778, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 358-60.
- ²⁹ Nagle to Fitzsimons, 28th September 1770, <https://ursulinesisters.omeka.net/items/show/10>.
- ³⁰ Nagle to Fitzsimons, 17th December 1770, <https://ursulinesisters.omeka.net/items/show/9>
- ³¹ SPC, Annals, entry for 1771.
- ³² Indenture between Isabella Harper (window of John Harper) and Nano Nagle, op. cit.
- ³³ SPC, Annals, entry for 18th September 1771.
- ³⁴ In fact, this edition of Rocque's map is the only map which records any buildings in this location until Chalmer's Local Survey Map, 1832, Cork Local Studies, Cork City Library.
- ³⁵ Evergreen Street is known as Maypole Lane on Rocque's map of 1773.
- ³⁶ Nagle to Fitzsimons, 28th September 1770, <https://ursulinesisters.omeka.net/items/show/10>.
- ³⁷ UCB, MS 04293, Endowment of £2,000 to the Ursulines of the City of Corke, signed by Honora Nagle, John Butler, F Moylan, 18th September 1771.
- ³⁸ The idea of a hidden landscape associated with Catholic architecture and landscape is further explored in Finola O'Kane, 'Dublin's Fitzwilliam Estate: a hidden landscape of discovery, Catholic agency and egalitarian suburban space', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland; Irish an dá chultúr*, vol. 31, 2016, 94-118.
- ³⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 18th February 1772, quoted in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 83.
- ⁴⁰ Francis Carleton quoted in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 84.
- ⁴¹ Pius O'Farrell, *Nano Nagle: Woman of the Gospel* (Cork, 1996) 133.
- ⁴² UCB, MS 03797, Annals, entry for 1772.
- ⁴³ Nagle to Mulally, 24th August 1778, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 358-60.
- ⁴⁴ UCB, MS 00239, Account Book. It seems likely that in December 1772, Nagle also loaned the Ursuline Sisters £100 to be spent on the building of the chapel. This money, or at least part of it, was to be repaid at £6 per annum for the rest of Nagle's life. See UCB, MS 03813.
- ⁴⁵ UCB, MS 03797, Ursuline Annals, entry for 18th April 1776.
- ⁴⁶ SPC, Annals, 'A short account of Miss Nano Nagle, our venerable mother, the Foundress of the Presentation Order and of this Monastery in the Annals of South Presentation Convent'.
- ⁴⁷ UCB, MS 03797, Annals, entry for 1777.
- ⁴⁸ Peckham Magray, *Transforming Power of the Nuns*, 9-10.
- ⁴⁹ Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 99.
- ⁵⁰ When it was replaced by a larger structure during the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Annals described the site of the new convent as lying 'a little further back in the garden, than our present house, which was built by Mother Nagle'. SPC, Annals, 10th February 1808.
- ⁵¹ SPC, Annals, 'A short account of Miss Nano Nagle'. There were tensions between Nagle and Moylan at times, but he was also a strong supporter. Indeed, when the fledging Presentation Sisters in 1800 decided to establish themselves as a religious order within the church rather than remain a religious

- congregation (a decision which meant enclosure), Moylan strongly opposed it as he knew enclosure was anathema to Nano Nagle.
- ⁵² Dr Coppinger, *The Life of Miss Nano Nagle* (1794), in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix B, 384-95.
- ⁵³ Nano Nagle to Teresa Mulally, 21st August 1777, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 357-58.
- ⁵⁴ UCB, MS 00239, Account Book. It is known that the first members of Nagle's newly established Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus did for a time live within the Ursuline enclosure as they are included an entry in an account book for 1778, under the Number of Pensioners, as 'Miss Nagle and four young women'.
- ⁵⁵ M. Angela Collins to Joseph Nagle, 12th June 1800, *Positio*, 459-463.
- ⁵⁶ UCB, MS 04239, endowment of £2,000 to the Ursulines, 18th September 1771. Of that £2,000, she paid the Ursulines £1,100 and bequeathed the remaining £900 in her will to Mary Kavanagh (Mother Ursula, the superior of the Ursuline Convent), Will of Nano Nagle, 25th April 1784, *Positio*, 421-22.
- ⁵⁷ Nagle to Mulally, 24th August 1778, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 358-60
- ⁵⁸ Nagle to Mulally, 29th July 1780, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 364-65. Nagle's new convent was clearly finished at this time, however, as she notes in this letter that they had been eating at the new convent for several months, which they found more convenient.
- ⁵⁹ See for example, *Saunders's Newsletter*, 20th March 1775 and 2nd November 1786; *Dublin Evening Post*, 3rd November 1787.
- ⁶⁰ See for example *Dublin Courier*, 12th August 1763; *Saunders's Newsletter*, 14th June 1777 and 14th September 1781.
- ⁶¹ *Dublin Evening Post*, 15th September 1781.
- ⁶² *Saunders's Newsletter*, 14th November 1786.
- ⁶³ Nagle to Mulally, 29th July 1780, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 364-65.
- ⁶⁴ SPC, Account Book, entries for 1794-95, 1799, 18-02. The figures listed for the tax paid is inconsistent so it is impossible to know exactly how many hearths and windows there were, but based on the available information, eight hearths and twelve windows seems most likely. R. Goodbody, "'Tax upon daylight": window tax in Ireland', *Irish Architecture and Decorative Studies*, IX, 2006, 86-87.
- ⁶⁵ Nagle to Mulally, 31st January 1783, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 366-67.
- ⁶⁶ SPC, South Presentation Annals, 1795, 1803.
- ⁶⁷ Nagle to Mullally, 31st January 1783, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 366-67.
- ⁶⁸ The Ursulines remained in residence until 1825, at which time they moved to a much larger building in the suburb of Blackrock, and the vacated buildings off Douglas Street were subsequently occupied by the Presentation Order.
- ⁶⁹ Account books held in the Ursuline Archives detail expenditure on the gardens in the 1780s and 1790s, which included gardeners wages, payment for a substantial number of trees, gravel for the garden, garden seats, paving and the raising of walls. UCB, MS 01498 and MS 00673, Account Books.
- ⁷⁰ The Ursuline Annals were first compiled in the early nineteenth century. This entry records the addition of the extension to the original building in 1790, UCB, MS 03797, Annals.
- ⁷¹ John Windele, *Historical and Descriptive Notices of the City of Cork and its Vicinity* (Cork, 1839), 47.
- ⁷² Nagle also undertook other building projects on the same site. In 1783 she acquired and refurbished a house on Douglas Street as an almshouse for poor, elderly women. SPC, South Presentation Annals; Nagle to Mulally, 3rd January 1783, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, Appendix A, 366-67.