

"Through Corridors Of Life"

A look at Nano Nagle's influence on Educational Psychology in Ireland

Under the heading 24th June, 1776. Mother di Pazzi Leahy notes in her *Annals*: "From this year we may date the foundation of the Presentation Order".

So we are now celebrating the bicentenary of a renowned teaching congregation which originated in Cork City and currently runs some 400 schools throughout the five continents.

Its foundress was Honora (Nano) Nagle, a distant cousin of Edmund Burke and kinswoman also of Father Theobald Matthew, the apostle of temperance. The confusion which has arisen over some of the most basic facts of her life history is good illustrative material for a lecture on the psychology of testimony!

Her friend Bishop William Coppinger stated (1794) that Nano Nagle died on 26th April 1784, aged 56 years. He got the date right but the age wrong. Perhaps that is why Dean Murphy in both his *Memoirs* (1845) and his *Sketches* (1865) incorrectly gives her year of birth as 1728 instead of mid-1718. Arch-deacon Hutch (1875) manages to perpetrate two errors when he states (p.5 and p.96) that Nano died on 20th April 1784 aged 56. As Walsh (1959) points out, Murphy's "inexactitude" is the more remarkable because he printed the inscription on her tombstone which ends:

"She departed this life, envied by many, regretted by all, on the 26th day of April 1784, aged 65 years". Hutch seems to have strephosymbolically copied 65 as 56!

Nano was the eldest of seven children. The Nagles were wealthy merchants and landowners, Nano may well have attended a hedge school near her home at Ballygriffin before going to France for the rest of her education. She possibly was admitted to the school at St. Cyr founded by Madame de Maintenon. (Certainly her cousin Marie Anne Nagle was a Demoiselle there later on).

On leaving school Nano together with her sister, Anne, remained in Paris with relatives; but, after their father's death (which occurred around 1746), the two girls settled in Dublin with their widowed mother and devoted themselves to visiting the homes of the poor to distribute alms.

Soon afterwards the saintly Anne died and Nano decided to enter a convent in France. Her spiritual director, however, advised her to follow the urgings of her conscience and return to Ireland, there to promote the education of the children of the poor. As her mother too had died by now, she accepted the invitation of her brother, Joseph, and his wife, Frances, to share their home in Cove Lane, Cork.

Possibly as early as 1749, and certainly no later than 1755, Nano rented a little thatched mud cabin, also in Cove Lane, as a school house. She gathered 30 poor girls from the neighbourhood as pupils. When her brother, Joseph, found out what she was doing, he was initially angry because of the terrible risk (e.g. of life imprisonment) she was running under the Penal Statutes against Catholic education (8 Anne, c.3) — the Relief Act of 1782 was not passed until more than a quarter of a century later.

Eventually, however, Joseph became a stalwart supporter and generous benefactor of Nano's work. Her educational mission flourished. Within a couple of years she had 400 girl pupils enrolled in her schools in Cork. On her sister-in-law's insistence she next opened a cabin school for 40 boys. By 1769 she had five schools for girls and two for boys.

Wealthy though she was she soon encountered financial difficulties as the teachers' salaries and the general cost of upkeep of the schools mounted. Promised financial support was not always forthcoming.

Students of human nature will not be surprised at the opposition Nano encountered even from those who might have been expected to be on her side. Bishop Coppinger (1794) lamented the fact that

"While this good woman was bestowing her substance, and herself also, in charity to the poor, she has received the most opprobrious insults from some of the inhabitants of this city. She has been bitterly cursed in our streets as a mere impostor; she has been charged with having squandered her money upon the building of houses for the sole purpose of getting a name, and with deceiving the world by her throng of beggar's brats".

Even stronger abuse than that she humbly bore. While leading a life of mortification and indeed heroic sanctity, Nano Nagle had yet another serious problem to overcome— her poor health. As she admitted to Miss Eleanor Fitzsimons in a letter of which there is a transcript dated 17th July 1769 in the Ursuline Convent, Blackrock, Cork: ". . . in the beginning — being obliged to speak for upwards of four hours and my chest not being as strong as it had been — I spat blood".

Despite all difficulties the schools flourished. Nano herself seems to have been a born teacher. In the same letter she tells Miss Fitzsimons that: "*I often think my schools will never bring me to heaven, as I only take delight and pleasure in them*".

According to Bishop Coppinger (1794):

"In her schools ever laborious, patient, vigilant and judicious, she studied the dispositions of her uncouth pupils, the degree of capacity they possessed; she adapted her instructions accordingly: she watched their countenances, which long experience had taught her to read, and proceeded, or turned back, or explained, or repeated, as she found them impressed with what she said".

Since the work of her paid assistant teachers was not always to her satisfaction, and since she wished to ensure that her institutions for the education of the poor would continue after her death, she decided to introduce a religious order to staff her schools. On 18th September, 1771 a group of five Ursulines, Irish-born but trained in France, took up occupation of the convent which Nano as foundress had had built for them in Cove Lane. They opened a boarding school for girls in January, 1772.

The Bicentenary of the founding of the Presentation Teaching Order was recently honoured by the issue of an Irish postage stamp, reproduced here by kind permission of the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. [To mark the occasion the Editor invited Professor Martin McHugh to enlarge upon the references he made to the Order's Foundress, Nano Nagle, in his 1971 Presidential Address to the Psychological Society of Ireland: The Passing Tribute of P.S.I.—a review and Appreciation of Pioneers of Psychology in Ireland. Unfortunately, the Editor had to ask that the article be kept brief. Professor McHugh's contribution deserves more space and a wider readership.]



The Order's rule of enclosure, however, prevented the Ursulines from staffing Nano's schools for the poor in quite the way she intended. Furthermore, the Ursuline constitution prescribed a wider area of educational activity than the special field in which Nano was interested.

Consequently, on 25th January 1775, Nano invited two young Cork ladies, by name Mary Fouhy and Elizabeth Burke, to form with her a new community devoted entirely to the education of the poor. They were joined on Christmas Eve by a Mary Ann Collins. On 24th June 1776 all four received the religious habit. To this new congregation Nano Nagle gave the name of *Society of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. The title was later changed to *Sisters of the Presentation of the Ever Blessed Virgin Mary*.

Apart from herself founding the Ursuline Convent in Cork and the now world-wide Presentation Order, Nano also inspired another great Irish educator Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers. As Fitzpatrick (1945) points out, when Edmund Rice and two companions took up residence at Mount Sion,

Waterford, for the first time in June 1803, "*their life was regulated by the Rule of the Ladies of the Presentation adapted to suit the requirements of men*" (p.282).

It is, however, through the work of the Irish Ursulines and of the Presentation Sisters and Brothers that Nano Nagle's influence has most clearly continued to the present day. Both Orders have made significant contributions to education in Ireland and have often displayed a sound intuitive grasp of educational psychology well in advance of their time. Space does not permit more than a few examples.

As Evelyn McHugh has pointed out (1975), the three history textbooks published by Mother Ursula Young of the Ursuline Convent, Blackrock, Cork, in 1815, had many important innovative features.

For example her *Sketch of Irish History* used a catechetical method somewhat reminiscent of a programmed text. In its emphasis on ideas and policies, it eschews the hitherto common cataloguing of events such as battles and reigns. The surprisingly large coverage of *recent* history in the *Sketch* (which devotes most attention to the 40 year period which preceded its publication) perhaps accords better than the time-span of rival texts with the interests and temporal concepts of the age-group of students envisaged.

In 1841 an Ursuline Nun from the Cork Convent published *A System of Chronology*. This contained a code for translating historical dates into memorable words or phrases. The mnemonic principle was good, even if its application was not always successful.

A Directory for the Religious of the Presentation Order was published in Cork in 1850. It was for internal use. As far as can be ascertained, its pedagogic contents have not been publicised before now.

Those sections of the *Directory* which have to do with the conduct of the Order's schools are to a surprising extent in accord with modern educational psychology. Let us just sample their substance under a few headings:

SELECTION OF PUPILS:

"The Religious are bound to receive none into their schools but those who are poor. In country towns the children of the well-to-do may be admitted but if the number is too many to enable the Nuns to give full attention to the poor, they must be sent away from the school".

(This sounds like an 'Operation Headstart' of the early 19th century).

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

"If, in order to govern others well, it be first necessary to have learned command of ourselves, the Nuns destined for the care and instruction of poor children, should watch over and suppress whatever emotions of passion may arise in their correction, taking care not to give way to anger. They must never, through impatience or otherwise, strike or hurt them; should chastisement of this kind be necessary it must only be inflicted on them at home and by their parents or guardians."

"As some young persons are corrected by fear, others by gentleness; some by silence, others by a look or gesture; the Nuns in each school will study their natural inclinations, capacities and dispositions in order to treat them accordingly; and to conduct them with prudence and discretion". (Shades of Eysenck here!)

"A child ought never to be punished on the complaint of her companions, as this would occasion animosity and disunion not only amongst themselves but also amongst their parents. Children that are naturally bold and ungovernable must not be discouraged by over-severity in their correction; it would be more useful to excite them by emulation to become good and virtuous".

PARENT-TEACHER MEETINGS

"They who have charge of the children shall occasionally see their parents or guardians, to confer with them regarding their improvement in school, their conduct at home, or any other point on which it may be useful or necessary to consult them".

SIZE OF CLASSES

"The pupils should be arranged in classes, the size of which must depend on the nature of the school (from 10 to 20 may be a good number)".

INDIVIDUAL REMEDIAL TUITION

"If the children be very deficient the mistress shall teach them one by one, which is the best method of quickly advancing them".

EMPHASIS ON LEARNING WITH UNDERSTANDING

"In teaching arithmetic nothing must be considered done that is not thoroughly comprehended; a meaning and a reason must be attached to every step of the process".

LIMITATION OF STUDY

"Nothing will be gained by straining the faculties or attempting too much at once. To produce languor by overworking the mind, is to inflict a serious injury; progress in any intellectual pursuit depends more upon attention than protracted study".

Small wonder that, directed by such psychologically sound precepts, Presentation Schools often received favourable comments from inspectors. As far back as 1825 we find the Commissioners of Inquiry into Education in Ireland reporting that:

"We have visited these (15 Presentation schools) and found them well conducted. We were much impressed with the appearance of affection and respect on the part of the pupils towards their teachers which characterises these institutions to a remarkable degree."

To sum up:

Our examination of the educational influence of Nano Nagle in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries has (as far as educational psychology is concerned) thrown up some examples which fit T. S. Eliot's description of *"time present contained in time past."*

The needs of the modern world have brought about some changes in the mission and methods of the Presentation Order. It is no longer exclusively concerned with *"the instruction of poor female children"*, but runs liberal arts colleges, teacher training colleges, coeducational high schools, special schools for the mentally handicapped, orphanages, and day nurseries in addition to the more traditional Presentation primary schools.

But in all these varied educational establishments the lamp of learning lit by Nano Nagle in eighteenth century Cork still shines, as Spender would put it, *"through corridors of light."*

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