

Nun of Kenmare Embattled Religious Reformer

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Abstract: *The Nun of Kenmare was a widely known controversial Victorian writer and figure in Ireland and America. After her death in 1899, her very existence became a little known fact. Early in the 1960s the Poor Clare nuns in Kenmare, County Kerry in Ireland were amazed to discover her books and papers as belonging to one of their founders about the time when they were marking the centenary of the convent's foundation. Later in the 1960s, a Dublin journalist began reading the Nun's writings. The Poor Clares of Kenmare strove to distance themselves from the Nun of Kenmare when the Dublin journalist published books about her as pioneering feminist. During the 1970s, the Congregation of St. Joseph of Peace in America at last discovered the identity of their true founder, the Nun of Kenmare, a historical fact which surprised and continues to inspire them to lead the way in researching her life and proclaiming her radical views of church reform. Recently Irish historians have been looking into the Nun. Initial approval of "Sister Suffragette" has given way to questioning the Nun's eccentricity as a reformer, the Nun's attitudes towards the hierarchical workings of the Catholic Church, the Nun's excessive hagiographical tendencies, the Nun's emotional entrapment in Victorianism. In response to these questions, here is presented a version of the life and works of the Nun as embattled religious reformer, still relevant to the problems within the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.¹*

Keywords: *The Nun of Kenmare; Congregation of St. Joseph of Peace; "Sister Suffragette".*

Here are two very self-revealing quotations from the Nun of Kenmare, written some thirty years apart. The first quotation was penned in the late 1860s when the Nun was about forty years of age:

May we not hope that Ireland will become once more famous for learning and sanctity. The future of our nation is in the hands of the hierarchy. No government dare refuse anything which they may demand perseveringly and unitedly. (*Illustrated History* 9)

The wider cultural context for such a tribute to the powerful and seemingly benevolent authority of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy stemmed from its restoration by

Pope Pius IX in 1850 which had triggered an optimistic programme of Catholic Renewal that included the building of many neo-Gothic churches throughout the land and the widespread spontaneous growth of devotion to Mary Mother of God encouraged by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception solemnly proclaimed by Pius IX in 1854 and by the apparitions at Lourdes in 1858. The Irish Catholic Hierarchy were quick to respond to John Henry Newman's call for a Second Spring by inviting Newman to Dublin, also in 1854, to lecture on the idea of an university as the first step towards the formation of Dublin's Catholic University. No wonder the Nun was moved to believe that the Second Spring in Ireland would be a cultural revival of the "isle of saints and scholars" to be led by the newly reinstated hierarchy.

The second quotation was published by the Nun when she was in her early sixties.

I found that from first to last Rome was a gigantic fraud. She professes to be "holy" par excellence but where is the holiness? The more power she has the more degraded are her subjects, ignorant alike of wisdom, human and Divine. (*Story of My Life* 377)

The shift in the Nun's view of Roman Catholic Church was truly seismic. The Irish context of this shift included the recent fall of her hero Charles Stewart Parnell in which the Irish Hierarchy had played a gloating role. In spite of her mutually complimentary exchanges with Pope Pius XI and Pope Leo XIII, the Nun gradually evolved into a vitriolic critic of the Hierarchy's policies from the 1870s onwards on vexed questions of Irish Land reform, apparitions at Knock, education of poor girls and role of women in public life. Opposition to her work by church authorities in Ireland and America grew so hostile that her already praised contributions were dismissed, later to the point where even her once widely-read books were consigned to oblivion.

Irish awareness of the Nun in Ireland began to surface during 1961 when the Superior of the Poor Clare Convent in Kenmare County Kerry, Sister Philomena McCarthy, encouraged by Kerryman Professor Cremin, canon lawyer from Maynooth, decided to mark the centenary of the foundation of the convent by tidying up the convent attic unvisited in living memory. The Poor Clare community discovered many books, papers and memorabilia all closely connected to one of their founding Poor Clare nuns who had travelled from Newry to found the convent in 1861. That forgotten founder was Margaret Anna Cusack, "the Nun of Kenmare."

During the 1960s an Irish journalist on *The Irish Times* and Radio Telefis Eireann Irene French Eagar grew interested in the ways of the Nun. French Eagar read books by M.F. Cusack in Dublin's National Library and a cross section of the Nun's letters and articles published in many newspapers across the world. The first edition of French Eagar's book was entitled *The Nun of Kenmare*. The second revised edition was entitled *Margaret Anna Cusack: One Woman's Campaign for Women's Rights* with the preface by the scholarly Dominican nun, Margaret MacCurtain. In the Preface (vii-xii), MacCurtain discussed the Nun as an unruly, vital and tragic figure who died embittered and solitary

yet still ought to be seen as the most important forerunner of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and the Countess Markievicz for championing the liberation of Irish women, a view taken up by Radharc Productions in 1982 when a documentary was shown on RTE about her entitled *Sister Suffragette*. In 1989 the former Superior of Kenmare, towards the end of her life, published a pamphlet of 86 pages which was written to prove that the views of the Nun of Kenmare were not only very far removed from the real demands of contemporary Women's rights but were the product of a "disturbed mind" lacking in any fidelity to church teaching. While obviously intent on returning the Nun to richly deserved obscurity, McCarthy spread the news that probably the apostate did experience a death-bed conversion mainly as a result of the prayers of the faithful Poor Clare nuns in Kenmare. Perhaps such an approach led MacCurtain to conclude in her brief entry for the Nun in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* that while she remained a controversial figure for eccentricity and wilfulness, "she never abandoned her pursuit of justice for the poor."

In America by the early 1970s the Congregation of St. Joseph of Peace were overjoyed to discover the identity of the person who had actually set up their foundation about ninety years before. This American rediscovery of the Nun climaxed in 1990 when Sister Margaret Rose O'Neill of the Congregation published a graphic account of the founder. O'Neill's book concluded that Mother Clare ought to be remembered, above all else, as the founder of the Sisters of Peace, founded to work out practical solutions to the problems of justice and peace especially for women of all ages in the modern world. O'Neill used a vivid metaphor to explain the poisonous atmosphere which her enemies surrounded the Nun's good works during her lifetime by evoking the legend of the Upas Tree that poisons everything that comes into contact with it (vii). On the final pages, O'Neill directly addressed the source of inspiration beyond the grave with genuine gratitude and affection: "We grieve at your pain while we rejoice at your vision" (203-205).

My own first awareness of the Nun's existence happened during the 1990s with the republication of her book about the history of County Kerry. The book impressed me as a tapestry of the Kingdom, my own native county, combining history, ecclesiology, archaeology, topography, geology, genealogies from the earliest times, plus maps and a selection of extracts from texts over the centuries. My next encounter with the Nun occurred during 1998 with the re-publication of the Nun's first autobiography. In the Introduction Maria Luddy highlighted her interest in the Nun's historical writing which was influenced by renowned Irish scholars such as John O'Donovan, Eugene Curry and Audrey de Vere and grew further from her lively correspondence with the likes of Sir William Wilde and the O'Connell family of Derrynane. While Luddy was full of praise for the Nun's campaigns on behalf of the tenants and labourers on Irish landlord estates, she expressed unease about the Nun's naïveté in church politics with her preference for the role of women as mothers in Christian homes (v-xiv).

Irish historians have expressed views of the Nun in studies of nineteenth-century Irish Catholicism. In Professor Eugene O'Neill's recent study into the Apparition at Knock, County Mayo in the context of a series of local crises involving the Land League,

the Campaign for Home Rule, and the Irish church's uses of the earliest pilgrims to Knock, the Nun may appear only as a minor character but the local coalition of priests and landlords against which she battled are documented in considerable detail. The Nun's relevance in the field of nineteenth-century Irish Studies has been confirmed recently in a long entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, written by the cultural historian Patrick Maume. After his detailed analysis, Maume cautiously concluded: "in her frustrations and partly strategic invalideism, her doubts and polemics, her aspiration as sage and social reformer, Cusack was a Victorian rather than a twentieth-century figure."

Public interest in the Nun has continued to grow apace largely driven by the resourcefulness of her American Congregation (CSJP). Work on their rediscovered founder climaxed in 2006 when Sister Rosalie McQuaide put online an updated long list of the Nun's published writings under the entry of Cusack, M.F. An ongoing CSJP project began in 2005 with the publication of an annual journal in print and online *Studies on the Life & Work of Margaret Anna Cusack* which mainly uses the Nun's own words to piece together for the benefit of both scholars and general readers an increasingly detailed understanding of her place in the history of Church reformers.

Research over the last fifty years has rescued the Nun from the shroud of obscurity wrapped around her by enemies, and has suggested more interesting background on the gaps, digressions, repetitions, self-justifications to be found scattered about especially throughout her hastily over-written autobiographies. Certainly the main thrust of all her campaigning was directed against manifestations of a repressive, obsessive, hypocritical church hierarchy; yet her approval of Leo XIII seems to have remained intact. In the case of her early admiration for Pius IX, she seems to have ignored the implications of his authoritarian Syllabus of Errors issued in 1864. So far the Nun's modern rescue has most benefited her Congregation. Her presence in the Irish imagination has still to progress beyond the flittings of a feminist ghost from the nineteenth century. As my interest in the Nun has been growing, my conviction has been formed that her presence in the Irish imagination ought to be that of a rare spirit battling both for the reform of Hierarchy in the Catholic Church and for genuine understanding and revival of the traditions of prayer to be found in the early Irish Church.

In the following sequence, I divide into seven parts her story as an embattled religious reformer stretching across most of the nineteenth century and now waiting in the wings of the twentieth-first century.

1. Reluctant exile from Ireland

Margaret Anna Cusack was born in 1829 in Coolock village near Dublin, a safe place where members of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry lived apart from the Dublin poor. In her childhood, Margaret Anna's father Samuel who had trained as a doctor at the Apothecaries Hall practised unsuccessfully mainly due to his own poor health in premises on Digges Street, Dublin at the back of the College of Surgeons. Her uncle was

James William Cusack, Samuel's half brother, who had a thriving medical practice at 3 Kildare Street and became a pioneering Professor of Surgery at Trinity College Dublin. James William felt sorry for struggling Samuel and tried to help him out, with a move to Monkstown for a fresh start close to successful members of the family. Samuel's wife Sarah was a fervent Low Church Episcopalian and insisted on bringing up her children in that religious tradition. Meanwhile Margaret Anna largely educated herself by reading very widely, showed musical and linguistic talents and at quite an early age acquired the overwhelming ambition to write. As a rebellious adolescent not close to her mother and brother Samuel, Margaret Anna felt closest to her father as he battled against failure in life. When her mother decided to abandon her failing and ailing husband in 1843 and took her two children off with her to live in Exeter with great aunt Baker and other relatives who were prosperous members of the Plymouth Brethren, Margaret Anna still felt very close to her embattled father.

2. Conversion in England

Margaret Anna was sent to a boarding school, probably Godolphin School in Salisbury where she developed her many talents. She defied convention by travelling alone to Ireland in order to comfort her ailing father whom her mother had rejected. She became engaged to Charlie Holmes, probably a young Devonshire clergyman who much impressed her by his concern for others. A sense of total personal devastation engulfed her when both her father in Wicklow and fiancée in Devon died in quick succession and she resolved to dedicate the rest of her life to battle on behalf of the deprived. Influential local friends introduced the energetic young woman to Edward Pusey, leader of the Anglican wing of the Oxford Movement, who persuaded her to direct her energies by becoming an Anglican novice nun. Very swift disillusionment with inactive Anglican nuns ensued and later Margaret Anna would write a satirical novel *Hornehurst Rectory* (1872) about her negative experiences during this period. She was introduced to Henry Manning (later Cardinal Manning) who persuaded her to join the Catholic Church in whose service she would become a nun who was able to give practical help to the needy poor. Much inspired by Manning's advice and much to the fury of Pusey, first she was received into the Catholic church and confirmed by Cardinal Wiseman in 1858. The Cardinal, a writer himself, challenged her to devote her writing talents in her battle to inspire and support fellow-Catholics in the new age of great opportunity.

3. Encouragement in Ireland

Margaret Anna was introduced to Mother Mary O'Hagan the Superior of the Poor Clare in Newry, Ireland. Mother O'Hagan had been born into a well-to-do Catholic family in Belfast and her brother was Thomas O'Hagan, a very distinguished barrister

who would later be appointed by Prime Minister Gladstone as the First Lord Chancellor of Ireland and the first Lord O'Hagan. After their meeting, Mother O'Hagan invited her new friend to join the convent in Newry to enable her to follow Manning's advice to make a practical difference for the deprived and Wiseman's advice to develop her talents as a Catholic writer. So Margaret Anna was received into the Newry convent in 1859 as Sister Mary Francis Clare. Shortly afterwards an urgent request to Mother O'Hagan came from Father Sullivan, Parish Priest of Kenmare on behalf of Bishop Moriarty of Kerry, to found a convent school for poor girls in Kenmare. Mother Mary set off for Kerry with six sisters including Sister Mary Francis Clare during 1861. Throughout the rest of the 1860s, the Nun concentrated on keeping the promise to Wiseman by writing which she did by researching and writing about Irish history which explored the links between the culture of Celtic Saints and contemporary Ireland. With the permission of the Superior, she set up a form of self-publication within the Kenmare Convent which produced a continuous stream of books and a number of small devotional pamphlets, most of which were reviewed favourably in the *The London Tablet*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Monthly*, *Cork Examiner*, *Irish Canadian*, *The New York Tablet*, *L'Univers* in Paris. The Nun sent letters and articles to many newspapers. Irish emigrants worldwide got to know about her and bought her publications in considerable numbers. Offers from established publishers were gratefully accepted. The Nun of Kenmare was becoming an Irish Catholic household name at home and abroad. Financial profit from the books helped the Poor Clare community in Kenmare to fund the expansion of the education offered to poor local girls to include the skills of lace-making. The Nun's musical abilities as organist and composer of hymns for children were much appreciated by worshippers in the parish church at Kenmare.

By the 1870s the Nun was writing biographies of "heroes" like Daniel O'Connell the Catholic Emancipator, Father Matthew the Temperance Friar, and Pope Pius IX, the Marian Devotee. Already she was beginning to remember her promise to Manning and began to write directly about the social reform necessary for workers in contemporary Ireland. The death of Mother O'Hagan in 1876 inspired a *In Memoriam* tribute. After the loss of her closest friend, the battle on behalf of the neglected increased and turned into campaigning against indifferent landlords after the return of serious famine to Ireland in 1879, and the foundation of the Land League. Lord O'Hagan invited her to write a paper about Ireland's most urgent social problems for the annual Conference of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science to be held in Trinity College. The Nun's campaign against the landlords caused threats to be made to her life. In December 1880, a local march and rally in support of her stand on landlord injustice attracted about some 8000 tenants and farmers, a brass band from Killarney and a gigantic banner with the painted words in large capital *Kenmare resents the insults offered to Sister Mary Clare – Behold her bodyguard*. As a result of a worldwide appeal for Famine Relief by the Nun, contributions began to flow in, many of them addressed to her personally in the Kenmare convent – a total of about £15, 000 was reached.

Her paper for the Trinity College conference in 1881 was read in her discreet absence in the presence of Lord O'Hagan, Lord Chancellor of Ireland. The emphasis in the Nun's paper, widely reported, was on the needs of Irish emigrants set against the background of the appalling statistic that over two and a half million people had left Ireland over the previous twenty-eight years and were now living in dreadful urban ghettos in need of a helping hand from priests who were building great church buildings while remaining largely indifferent to the urgent educational needs of poor young Irish girls at great risk. The Nun's relentless battle against the local Lansdowne landowners began to lose her support from her convent superior, the local parish priest and the bishop of Kerry. Her political tract in 1881 *The Present Case of Ireland Plainly Stated* was such a forthright approval of the Land League policies of Charles Stewart Parnell that the battling Nun, her health now failing like her ailing father, decided to return to the Poor Clare Convent in Newry for a new beginning via Knock, from where there had been local reports of the Blessed Virgin's apparitions which she greatly welcomed. The Nun was accompanied on her retreat north from Kenmare by the few Poor Clare nuns still sympathetic to her plans to reform the Order of Poor Clares. Encouragement of her plans was forthcoming from Archbishop Croke of Cashel.

4. Nun's knock and beyond

The Nun was welcomed to Knock in the middle of November 1881 by Canon Bourke, parish priest of Claremorris, and Archdeacon Cavanagh, Parish Priest of Knock. Canon Burke, a learned Celtic scholar and historical writer, was already enthusiastic about the Nun's historical publications and Archdeacon Cavanagh was very eager to enlist the services of such a well-known Catholic writer in promotion of Knock as a new site of Catholic pilgrimage to equal if not surpass in popularity the earlier sites of Celtic pilgrimage. The Nun's first public prayers at Knock were to beg for a cure for her rheumatic condition which prevented her from kneeling. The subsequent sudden restoration of her health which meant that she could kneel to pray convinced the Nun that her cure was a special gift from Mary Queen of Heaven. The Nun's cure at Knock was highlighted in the local and the national press. In a strongly worded letter to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, the Nun stated that her cure was not a miracle in need of any approval from the Church authorities but a personal gift bestowed on her by Mary. The Nun concluded that Mary cured her to set up an industrial school for poor girls in Knock and set about raising funds for that project. At first there was strong popular support for the Nun's plans. Meanwhile Archbishop McEvilly of Tuam had worries about the Nun's challenging views of the cures at Knock. In a letter McEvilly ordered her to go to the Newry convent where the bishop of Dromore would clarify her duties as a nun. On her way back to Knock with a document from the bishop of Dromore, the Nun visited the Poor Clare community at Harold's Cross in Dublin, only to discover that the superior there had been forbidden by Archbishop McCabe of Dublin to allow her to stay overnight

in the convent. The Nun, to her consternation, realised that McEvelly's hostility was spreading. She returned to Knock in time for Christmas 1881 where she was forbidden by Archdeacon Cavanagh to receive the sacraments over the Christmas season because the Archbishop had not appointed a priest to be her confessor. The appointment took place after Christmas. Canon Bourke and Archbishop Croke pleaded with McEvelly to support the Nun, and there was much local popular support for the Nun who began to make slow progress with her industrial school project.

In early 1882 against the background of the Phoenix Park murder of British officials and the imprisonment of Parnell, the Archbishop of Dublin issued a pastoral letter forbidding women to take any direct part in politics which was interpreted in the press as a direct attack on the Nun's activities in Kenmare and Knock. When Archbishop McCabe was appointed to be a Cardinal in May 1882, his well-known hostility to the Land League provoked public protest in the streets by those who regarded the Archbishop of Dublin as hand-in-glove with the oblivious landlord class. The Nun obstinately refused to move from Knock, determined to fulfil her promise to the Queen of Heaven to build there a school for poor girls. The hostile yet dithering McEvelly permitted the Nun's project to stumble on when a local coachhouse in poor condition became a temporary convent for the group of Poor Clare nuns and a few idealistic postulants. Among the postulants in the Nun's company at this stage was Margaret Honoria Gaffney, a local national school teacher, who would become her closest friend. Even as the new school buildings were being constructed by local Works, the Nun began drafting a constitution for a new order under the protection of St. Joseph.

Her pamphleteering side continued with the publication of *The Present Cause of Ireland*, yet another attack on the abuses of the landlord system. Now McEvelly pronounced in public that the Nun's presence in Knock was a threat to the church's teaching authority. When the demand by Archdeacon Cavanagh that the Nun appoint him as manager of her school was rejected, the cat-and-mouse battle ended and the Archdeacon, the Archbishop and the local landlords united to indict the Nun of wickedness "unbefitting a nun". Local parishioners were encouraged to harass the nuns in the temporary convent and to disrupt the works on the building site of the industrial school. Under such pressure on all sides, the Nun decided to visit Cardinal Manning in London to discuss the foundation of the new order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. The advice from Manning was that such an order could be first set up quickly in the diocese of Nottingham where the Bishop Edward Bagshawe was ready to be its first patron. Much encouraged by Manning and Bagshawe, the Nun went on to meet Pope Leo XII in Rome to ask papal permission to found the new order, a permission which was granted after their one-to-one meeting in the Vatican in 1883. The audience with the Pope and the foundation of the new order was fully reported in *L'Observatore Romano* and the *London Standard*. The Nun herself wrote a letter to the Times London outlining the educational plans for the new order which was published on the 16 June 1884.

5. Nun's new world order and disorder

In 1884 the Nun, with Sister Evangelista, the former Margaret Honoria Gaffney by her side, set off for America to raise funds and set up schools run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace in Irish communities in the New World. Her mission was reported and approved of in the press. Young enthusiastic women were inspired to join the order. In her travels to various cities, the Nun encountered suspicion from the American Catholic Hierarchy who tended to dismiss her views of church authority largely based on reports about the wild nun being circulated by the likes of the Archbishops of Tuam and Dublin across the Atlantic. Her one successful contact in America was with Bishop Wigger of New Jersey who invited her to set up a school at Englewood for the Irish emigrant girls in his diocese. Her greatest opponent was Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York. Corrigan was born in America to Irish parents from County Mayo and trained as a moral theologian in Rome. At the time he was hard at work on the completion for God's glory of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York and so felt much angered by the publication in the New York of a strongly-worded article by the Nun detailing the many social problems being overlooked by the Catholic church in the city. Corrigan's fury was shared by his fellow ecclesiastics who decided that this Nun must be silenced once and for all. Bishop Keane, the rector of the newly opened Catholic University of Washington wrote a devastating rejection in response to a fervent defence of their Superior by the Sisters of St. Joseph already working at Englewood: "I could be no use whatsoever, nor anyone, nor anything, till she is quietly back in her place, her convent in Ireland." As this conflict between Nun and Hierarchy was being reported by the press, the Anglican Bishop of Massachusetts Huntington supported her appeal to Christians of all denominations to set up a mission in New York for poor Irish immigrants. Instant condemnation by Archbishop Corrigan inhibited support for such an adventurous proposal for Church unity in the face of pressing social problems and revealed to the Nun how local government in New York was dominated by Catholics unprepared to challenge the moral directions of their Archbishop.

By Summer 1888, the Nun realised that the preservation and development of the new foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in New Jersey depended on her own total withdrawal: "I hope when Archbishop Corrigan knows I have nothing to do with the sisters, that he will be satisfied and let them do the work of the order in peace." Her friend Sister Evangelista found herself in charge of the order at the age of thirty five. Already the Nun was working on the first volume of her autobiography. In spite of her growing sense of anti-clericalism, the Nun retained her early great enthusiasm for the Second Spring of the Catholic Church in Britain by including two highly significant items at the beginning of the first volume of her autobiography: a long extract from Cardinal Newman's autobiographical book *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and an open letter to Pope Leo XIII which included: "Holy Father, take these good sisters, whom I have so long loved and cherished and trained for this work, to your heart." During her last days in America, the Nun was given very little practical help for her departure by anybody. The only alternative was to seek refuge with cousins and friends back in England. In

1889, the Nun set out on the long sea journey back from the New World to the old world – exhausted, ill, disillusioned, extremely angry.

6. Darkness over the nun's soul

The defeated Nun returned to Devon where she had once been a precocious adolescent. At first she shared a house in Swanage where she was visited by the sisters of her former fiancé Charlie. Requests poured in from newspapers and evangelical groups, aware of her first autobiography, for articles and lectures which would expose further the corruption of the Catholic church. Her fury with Catholic officials and her need for survival money led her to respond to these invitations with chapter and verse. News such as the Irish Hierarchy's role in the fall of Parnell, the retirement from public life of Archbishop Croke, the death of Cardinal Manning increased the Nun's sense of frustrated isolation. The second volume of autobiography *The Story of My Life* appeared in 1891. Spiritual darkness hovered over the soul of the Nun as anger burnt out her strong writing instincts. Inevitably the Nun's detailed criticisms of the abuse of authority and hierarchy within Catholic Church, especially in the case of the Jesuits in another book *The Black Pope* in 1896, became grist to the mills of both fundamentalist enemies of the church and her own enemies within the church who continued to brand her recent writings as evidence of her corruption and absolute proof of her sinfulness and indeed, madness. Priests and nuns began to turn up in Devon in order to bring about the Nun's deathbed repentance which would damage her in world press headlines. During this dreadful period, the Nun's most sympathetic local friend was Rev. J.G. Gregory, an Anglican minister at Christ Church, Leamington Spa who invited her to live with his family at 21, Lansdowne Crescent, Leamington where she availed herself of the health facilities at the Spa. As she edged closer to death, the Nun received a letter of greeting from Sister Evangelista in the New Jersey Convent to which the Nun replied in a note dated 3 January 1899: "My own darling Evangelista, I find it difficult to write now... How I would love to see you and how I long to see you once more... your ever loving Mother, M.F.Cusack." Reports on the Nun's worsening state of health began to appear in *The Leamington Courier*. The Nun died on June 5, 1899 at the age of seventy and was buried in the Anglican section of Leamington Cemetery (v-xiv).

7. Nun's afterlife

What the Nun has published and what others have published about her add up to important testimonials of her important role in religious debate. That her writings have so inspired her Congregation in America to research and action adds substantially to that importance. Doubtless many letters and papers await discovery across the globe.² Nevertheless enough evidence is now in the public sphere to make a strong case for the

Nun's relevance to controversies currently raging within the Irish Catholic Church. The noteworthy legacy of a battling religious campaigner has occasionally become a belated agency for reform even when that reformer was roundly defeated by contemporaries. Will the Nun of Kenmare turn out to be one of those lives? Stranger things have happened!

Notes

- 1 A version of this essay was given as a talk to the Irish Literary Society London on 27.10.11
- 2 Recently Sister Catherine Fergusson CSJP published for the first time in her 100-page booklet correspondence between the Nun and her Irish clerical superiors during the multi-faceted crisis at Knock which reveals sequences of mutual recriminations. Fergusson's conclusion is that the Nun was a very gifted woman who had never really embraced the true Catholic faith, a view very different to the one taken by her fellow CSJPs in America. Significantly her view of the Nun of Kenmare is much welcomed in the pamphlet's Foreword by the current parish priest of Knock Msgr. Joseph Quinn. (5)

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