

ARCHIVE RESEARCH UPDATE – JUNE 2020

Recently Dr Cormac Begadon, of Durham University, gave a 'virtual' update to the Community. He outlined the various ways in which his research into the history of the Canonesses has been progressing, in spite of the Covid 19-related restrictions. He began his presentation with a brief update on four specific project milestones. The first of these was a piece of particularly good news for all those interested in the history of the Community: the planned publication of the Canonesses' 'migration narrative' from 1794. The story, which retells in such a vivid fashion, the escape and perilous journey of the Canonesses and their companions from Liège to England, will be published to academic standards, but in a manner that will make it accessible to non-specialist readers. Secondly, he brought news of the discovery of a prospectus for the school at Liège, dating from the early 1770s. A very rare example of a printed prospectus for an English Catholic school from this period, he outlined its historical significance and importance to his research. He also spoke about plans for a research workshop on the history of female religious in the early modern period, showcasing the collections of the Canonesses at Durham University. Finally, he mentioned the work of the project's Twitter page, @sepscollections, which publishes snippets from the collections. He mentioned that the page has received much interest from academics and non-academics, and has been picked up by New Hall School and their alumni.

After this Cormac went onto to talk in more detail about some of the specifics of his research, namely those relating the Canonesses interaction with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. His presentation brought to light aspects of our history from the vast archival and books collections now housed at Durham University. His particular interest related to the history of our school at Liège and how it was transformed in the 1770s to offer a modern, international and revolutionary system of education for girls. He began by telling us that the schools were part-and-parcel of the life of the majority of English convents on the Continent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These schools, he said, were usually quite small and had an educational focus that was predominantly religious, acting as recruitment centres for entrants to the religious life. What evolved at Liège was quite different, with a syllabus that offered both religious and secular education in a modern, international setting.

The driving force behind the school was S. Christina Dennett (1730-81). Born Mary Dennett to a Catholic mother and Protestant father in Appleton, Lancashire, she was schooled by the Ursulines in France before entering the convent at Liège in 1747. The impetus for her reforming the existing school at Liège came from her vision of the Sacred Heart in 1766, which she documented in detail in manuscript form. The Sacred Heart, she wrote, was a token of love and pardon for sinners who truly

repent, and out of this she embarked on reforming the school. Cormac drew on examples from the school prospectus to show the ways in which the educational offering plugged into the wider societal changes that had been brought about by 'enlightened' thought. The prospectus said that 'We teach reading and writing to the young boarding ladies; the English, French and Italian languages'. They received instruction in sacred and secular history, geography and the use of globes and 'the principles of natural history as much as it can suit people of the sex'; all of which would have been revolutionary in the education of girls. They also learned more practical skills conducive to the roles as wives and mothers: 'book-keeping and other accountancy skills', 'the difference of weight and measures in different countries' and 'embroidery and every use of a needle, the art of design and to paint flowers.' Much time was spent on developing the girls into young ladies too, with marriage opportunities no doubt in mind. Girls took classes in dance, music and portrait painting too. The school seems to have been quite before its time in taking into consideration the needs of the individual; there was a certain amount of flexibility outside what we might consider the core subjects.

Such was the success of the school that it was not long before it was attracting girls from outside of Britain. Soon girls arrived at the school from Ireland, America, the Caribbean, as well as many from Liège, Antwerp, and some from Brussels, Germany, and even from as far away as Stockholm. The international makeup of the school population was not accidental either, with the prospectus stating that there was to be 'acceptance of people, whichever country they may be from'. The school was undoubtedly a success. In a recent study of Jesuit education in Liège for boys, it was stated that: 'The new curricular venture at the English Academy took its main lead from recent developments at the convent school.' This really puts the school at Liège in a wider positive light: this was a rare and very early example of female education influencing the curriculum provided for young men, and therefore, is very significant.

Cormac told us that the success of the school unquestionably had an effect on the numbers of young women seeking to join the Community. From the 1770s he suggested that that convent at Liège experienced an explosion in vocations, with some fifty-five professions between the years 1770-99. This represented by far the greatest number of entrants out of all the English convents on the Continent in the corresponding period (its nearest 'competitor' was the Augustinian convent at Louvain, with twenty-six professions). It is not an understatement to say that Liège was the 'go to' convent of choice in the second half of the eighteenth century. Cormac described a Community and school that were vibrant, international institutions, adapting to the latest philosophical movements, yet remaining faithful to the Christian message that was at their heart.