

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, the English convent at Liège was already established as a major centre of a radically progressive system of schooling for girls / **By CORMAC BEGADON**

# Enlightened attitudes

**T**HE SUCCESSES of the Protestant Reformation forced the British and Irish Catholic communities to look towards continental Europe to re-establish convents, colleges, seminaries and schools. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a continual stream of young men and women set sail from home ports in search of a Catholic education in institutions located throughout France, the Low Countries, the Iberian Peninsula and beyond.

Yet this involuntary migration was in many respects far from a retrograde step. Rather than forcing the nation's Catholics to retreat into backward denominational and ideological ghettos, it transplanted thousands of young men and women into the heart of cosmopolitan societies, where secular and religious debates raged side by side.

One of the most popular destinations for young women was Liège, where an English branch of the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre (sometimes known as "the Sepulchrines") was

established in 1642. From the very beginning education became a meaningful expression of their charisma; a work by the English-born founder, Susan Hawley, included instructions for prospective students as to "the best and shortest way from England to Liège".

From its foundation in 1642 up to the 1760s the community, like the majority of the English convents on the Continent, offered what can be best described as a traditional "devotional" schooling. However, from the late 1760s the nature, and fortunes, of the school were changed irrevocably, thanks largely to the influence of one woman, Christina Dennett, (pictured) who had entered the convent in 1747. In 1766 Dennett's life was affected greatly by a vision of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What was to unfold at Liège, with all its associations with the "modern" and "progressive", had its roots in this spiritual experience.



Afterwards a new, purpose-built "school" was constructed, thanks largely to the generosity of the Stourton family. By the early 1770s the numbers of girls drawn to Liège continuously rose. Most were, as one would expect, British and Irish, but as time passed, and the school's reputation spread, girls arrived from the Low Countries and North America, with smaller numbers from Germany, France and Sweden. The record books even show girls coming from the Canary Islands.

**WHAT WAS IT** that attracted girls in large numbers from such disparate locations to Liège? The system of schooling and a culture where communality and individuality co-existed were the main draw. Up to this point English convent schools had been modest in size, hardly resembling what we would think of as a school, and their educational focus was more devotional, and certainly less "secular" or "worldly" than what emerged on Liège's rue Saint-Gilles.

In 1770, the Canonesses publicly outlined their vision for a new school in a published prospectus (a rarity for eighteenth-century female schools). Significantly, the language that they chose to use was French, and not English, perhaps a sign that the school's make-up would be international. Liège was known as a centre of "enlightened Catholicism", which had been famously promoted by the principality's prince-bishop, François-Charles de Velbrück (1719-84), with the school going on to imbue many "enlightened" ideals.

The Canonesses' system of education fused traditional religious instruction with the liberal arts and sciences, and was designed to "form

the heart of young people of a virtuous sex, to make them love religious practices" and "to train them in the customs of a polite and Christian world". Students were offered classes in modern languages, history, mathematics, accountancy and book-keeping, as well as "coats of arms; geography, use of globes; of the sphere, and the principles of natural history as much as it can suit people of the sex".

The prospectus was sprinkled with modern, progressive language common to the "Age of Enlightenment". It informed parents that "we often do public displays, during which we expect progress from our young ladies in the different parts of education that we give them". It proclaimed: "We encourage the less advanced and we give the others an opportunity to display their talents." While the

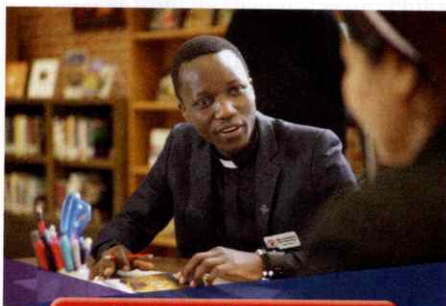
students included both daughters of the Catholic aristocracy and those from less privileged backgrounds, a culture of communality pervaded. "All boarders," we are told, completed "the same homework" and were "subject to the same rules".

The school's immediate success was such that it spurred on the Jesuits in the city's English College to reform their own educational offering along similar lines. By the time French Revolution broke out in 1789, the English convent at Liège had been transformed into a major centre of a radically progressive system of female education. The revolution forced the Canonesses to abandon their home on the Continent and seek shelter in England, where Catholics were enjoying an improving but still precarious legal and social standing. Moving from temporary homes in London, Yorkshire and then Wiltshire, the community finally found a permanent home in New Hall on the outskirts of Chelmsford, Essex, in 1799.

When the Canonesses (together with their chaplains, schoolgirls, servants and adult boarders) left Liège under the cover of darkness on 29 May 1794, they knew this would mark the beginning of a new chapter in their history. However, while their return to England and settling at New Hall spelled much change, it did not mean an end to the system of education that had proved so successful in the preceding decades.

The Canonesses embraced many of the Enlightenment ideals, pushing the boundaries as to what had been traditionally deemed necessary and acceptable for female education. The dialogue and openness evident at Liège, in spite of the unlikely setting of an eighteenth-century convent, continued to flourish after the establishment of New Hall in 1799.

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