

## Margaret MacCurtain (1929–2020): an appreciation<sup>1</sup>

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‘Wisdom it was I loved and searched for her from my youth. I resolved to have her as my companion. I fell in love with her beauty ....’

At the funeral mass for Margaret MacCurtain, her grandnephew, Michael, read the first reading from the Book of Wisdom, a moving and appropriate text with which to begin a celebration of Margaret’s life. The words carried an added significance as Michael’s reading emphasised that wisdom was represented in the biblical verse as female.

The narrative of Margaret’s life has been told in the many tributes to her since she died. She was born in Cork in 1929. Her father was a school inspector and her mother gave up a career in banking in London to return to Ireland to marry. Due to her father’s occupation, the family lived in different parts of north Kerry and Cork before they settled in Cork city. Although she lived most of her adult life in Dublin, a childhood spent in small Irish towns including Tralee and Spa gave her a life long empathy with rural Irish society. Margaret studied history, English and Irish at University College Cork (U.C.C.). On graduating in 1950 with a first class degree, she turned down an offer to undertake postgraduate studies in Oxford and instead enrolled for a teaching diploma at U.C.C. This was in preparation for entering the Dominican novitiate in County Kildare. Margaret’s decision to become a nun came as a surprise to her family, although she later said that the idea of a vocation had been at the back of her mind since she had spent time as a nine-year-old in the fever hospital in Listowel suffering from diphtheria. She

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See also (<https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/the-history-show/programmes/2020/1018/1172296-the-history-show-sunday-18-october-2020/>), radio programme broadcast on R.T.É., 18 Oct. 2020 (accessed 19 June 2022). I am also grateful to Margaret’s close friend, Professor Maureen O. Murphy, for additional information.

later referred to her choice of life as a female religious as ‘a way of containing a developed sense of reflection about the transcendent nature of reality’, a description that perhaps explains some of the apparent paradoxes in her life.<sup>2</sup>

On completing her novitiate, Margaret was given the name of Sister Benvenuta (abbreviated to Sister Ben by generations of her students) but following the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council she reverted to Margaret, although often mischievously giving new acquaintances a choice of three names: Sister Benvenuta, Margaret or Peg (used, as she explained, by her family and friends). Margaret took her final vows in 1955 and was assigned to teach history in Dominican College Sion Hill in Blackrock, County Dublin. After some years, she returned to university to study for an M.A. in Irish history and, subsequently enrolled for a Ph.D. Her research topic was the life of the Dominican priest, Daniel O’Daly (1595–1662). In later life, Margaret noted, somewhat resentfully, that she had had little involvement in the selection of her doctoral topic as it had been decided in a conversation between the mother prioress in Sion Hill and her supervisor, Robert Dudley Edwards in U.C.D.

O’Daly was, nonetheless, a fascinating topic for a doctoral thesis. Born in County Kerry in 1595, he spent much of his clerical life on the continent, establishing a Dominican convent for Irish nuns in Lisbon, serving as Portuguese ambassador in Paris, working as a royal matchmaker and authoring a number of texts including a history of the Geraldine family. Margaret’s thesis was a superb analysis of O’Daly’s life involving research in Portuguese, Spanish, French and Vatican archives. Unusually for a doctoral thesis it was also written in an elegant and accessible style. The thesis undoubtedly merited publication but discussions with a possible publisher did not progress, and it was not until 2017 that Maureen Murphy and Alan Hayes of Arlen Press persuaded her to publish it. Although written over fifty years ago, *Ambassador extraordinaire Daniel O’Daly, 1595–1662*, remains one of the few full-length studies of the generation of post-Reformation Irish bishops who spent most of their episcopal lives on the continent. A Portuguese translation is now in preparation.

Following the completion of her Ph.D. in 1963, Margaret worked part-time in U.C.D. until 1966 when she was appointed to a permanent teaching post. She retired from U.C.D. in 1994. Margaret never applied for promotion. She had agreed to the suggestion of Fr Feargal O’Connor, O.P., whose academic career coincided with that of Margaret, that in order to avoid any anti-clerical criticism none of the four Dominican clerics on the teaching staff in U.C.D. in the 1970s would go forward for promotion.

In 1969, Margaret had been an enthusiastic supporter of the student revolution in U.C.D.<sup>3</sup> She welcomed the fresh vision of the students for the university and agreed with them that the curriculum ‘needed a good shaking up’. An overview of Margaret’s teaching and research throughout her career reveals her commitment to shaking up the academic agenda. Her publications testify to the breadth of her intellectual interests, the sharpness of her analysis and her concern to ask the bigger questions of any historical development. Abandoning the focus of her doctoral thesis on diplomatic and political history, Margaret pushed out the intellectual boundaries set by the first editors of *Irish Historical Studies*. She welcomed opportunities

<sup>2</sup> Information provided by Professor Maureen O. Murphy.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Sister Benvenuta (Dr Margaret MacCurtain, O.P.), supporting U.C.D. students’ sit-in’, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hli4\\_gLYw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hli4_gLYw8) (11 June 2022).

to work collaboratively with colleagues across the disciplinary divide. She incorporated archaeology, art, literature, folklore and geography into her historical analysis. Along with her friend and colleague, Anngret Simms, Margaret was an active member of the interdisciplinary Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement, serving as president between 1977 and 1981.

Margaret's promotion of Irish women's history was another way in which she disrupted the academic history agenda. In the early 1970s, she joined with two other colleagues to propose a course comparing the history of female suffrage in Britain, Ireland and the United States. The proposal was rejected by the History department in U.C.D. Accusations of lack of subjectivity and the scarcity of sources reflected the academic refusal at the time to consider the history of women as a legitimate field of study.<sup>4</sup> Margaret also noted later that there was little demand among the students for such a course, a realisation that strengthened her determination to promote the intellectual value of adding the study of women to Irish historical studies.

Undaunted, therefore, by her colleagues' opposition, Margaret proposed to R.T.É. a series of lectures on the history of women to mark the United Nations International Year of Women in 1975. The resulting edited volume, *Women in Irish society: the historical dimension*, published in 1978 by the feminist press Arlen House, was the first academic study of Irish women's history. Co-edited with the early medieval historian, Donncha [Donnchadh] Ó Corráin, the essays were authored by a politically astute selection of male and female contributors, most of whom were well-known academic experts in their field. The essay collection was a best seller (over 10,000 copies were sold and it was subsequently reprinted in an American edition) and did much to awaken public and academic interest in women's history although it was not until 1987 that Margaret succeeded in getting a women's history course on the curriculum in U.C.D.

The success of *Women in Irish society* inspired Margaret to consider another volume of essays on women in early modern society. I co-edited this volume with her in 1991. We used the same methodology as in the previous collection: asking established scholars to contribute an article on an aspect of women's history in their area of expertise. The 'pink book' — *Women in early modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991) — proved very useful for many years for students beginning to undertake research on gender in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ireland.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Margaret was a key figure in the development of research into women's history in Ireland. The initiative for the establishment of the Irish Association for Research in Women's History was taken by Mary Cullen, then a lecturer in Maynooth University, but Margaret participated enthusiastically in the development of the I.A.R.W.H. and relished the engagement of a younger generation of women scholars whose publications were establishing the field in Ireland. Not surprisingly, Margaret was one of the first scholars whom Seamus Deane invited to be an editor of the *Field Day anthology of Irish writing, volumes iv and v*, and it was due to Margaret's efforts that historians were well represented on the editorial panel. Margaret took responsibility for the sections in the anthology on religion, science and women's relationship with religious institutions and their reflections on spirituality.

<sup>4</sup> Maureen Murphy, 'Foreword: the many voices of Margaret MacCurtain' in Margaret MacCurtain, *Ariadne's thread. Writing women into Irish history* (Galway, 2008), p. 18.

These are themes that recur throughout Margaret's academic writings. She included a chapter on the founding of the Bom Sucesso convent in Lisbon in her doctoral thesis. In later life, Margaret credited an article that she wrote in 1963 on St Mary's College, the Catholic third-level college for female students, as the inspiration for her interest in women's history. The article traces the efforts of a Dominican nun, Mary Jane Shiel, to establish St Mary's as a constituent college of the National University of Ireland following the model established by the women's colleges in England. Margaret's admiration for Shiel as a religious sister publicly defending women's right to third-level education shines through her analysis.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, Margaret wrote a number of surveys of the history of religious sisters in Ireland. She acknowledged, however, the challenge for 'those caught up in that way of life' to write with objectivity on certain issues in the lives of female religious, citing as an example the two-fold division in many convents between lay and choir sisters.<sup>6</sup>

Aware of the rejection of Catholicism by many Irish feminists, Margaret began to explore alternative forms of female religious expression from the early Irish saint, Brigid, through to the spiritual world of Peig Sayers and the lay activism of Edel Quinn. Margaret presented Brigid as a woman of power within the early Irish church: a founder of a monastery who ruled over an extensive ecclesiastical territory and a consecrated bishop. Drawing on her knowledge of rural Irish society and her fluency in the Irish language, Margaret perceptively suggested that Peig Sayers's spirituality was a mixture of contemporary devotion and ancient tradition that might be traced back to the time of Brigid. Sadly, Margaret's plans to write a biography of Edel Quinn faltered at difficulties in accessing relevant sources.

As generations of students can testify, Margaret was an inspiring teacher and had a deep interest in pedagogy. As a teacher of Irish history, she was aware of the absence of accessible textbooks for undergraduates. Although the editors of *Irish Historical Studies* had pledged in 1938 to provide resources for teachers, Leaving Certificate students and undergraduates in the 1960s were still relying on *A short history of the Irish people from the earliest times to 1920* by Mary Hayden and George A. Moonan, published in 1921. Margaret authored a number of school textbooks but her most significant contribution to history teaching was through the Gill History of Ireland series. In collaboration with James Lydon from T.C.D., Margaret identified eleven of the most promising young scholars in the field of Irish history to author individual, short volumes spanning chronologically from the early Christian period to the twentieth century. Margaret drew on her own teaching to write the volume on the Tudor and Stuart period. The Gill History was the first attempt to synthesise the new writings on Irish history, published since the 1930s, for a non-specialist readership.

In her study of Daniel O'Daly, Margaret noted that he had 'inherent in his nature a certain capacity for adventure'. Margaret's public life suggests that she too had a capacity for adventure or, as she recognised of herself: 'I find myself always in the stream of controversy, in interesting ways.'<sup>7</sup> From the 1960s when she criticised the

<sup>5</sup> The essay entitled 'St Mary's University College' was reprinted in MacCurtain, *Ariadne's thread*, pp 59–80.

<sup>6</sup> Many of these essays were reprinted in *ibid.* and Margaret MacCurtain, *Metaphors for change. Essays on state and society* (Dublin, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> 'Margaret' interview, 28 Jan. 1999 (<http://www.tallgirlshorts.net/marymary/margaret-text.html>).

Catholic church's control of Irish education, Margaret developed a high profile as a public commentator on contemporary issues and regularly appeared on Irish media to discuss political and social issues, as well as the role of the Catholic church in the modern world. She welcomed the changing nature of Irish society and supported many movements aimed at social change including the campaign against corporal punishment, improved conditions for children with special needs and, more controversially, the Right to Remarriage campaign that led to the divorce referendum of 1995. Margaret was also a member of the anti-apartheid movement, supported the Wood Quay preservation campaign and joined a group advocating the ending of internment in Northern Ireland. Coinciding with her promotion of women's history, she was an active participant in the second women's movement including supporting the use of contraceptives and the decriminalisation of gay relationships.<sup>8</sup>

In 1980, Margaret took a three-year leave of absence from U.C.D. to become the first principal of Ballyfermot College of Further Education. The college's commitment to equality of opportunity and access to education in a socially-deprived area of Dublin combined Margaret's belief in social justice with her interest in innovative pedagogy. She later pointed to her work in Ballyfermot as one of her proudest achievements.

Although Margaret's public activism might be perceived as support for positions that were contrary to Catholic teaching, this is to misunderstand her intention. A survey of Margaret's writings on the Catholic church in Ireland reveals her deep commitment to Catholicism. She was, however, concerned that the church was not adapting to the changes taking place in modern Ireland. She regretted for example, that female religious leaders in Ireland were slow to engage with the women's movement and had not made a submission to the Commission on the Status of Women in the 1970s. From the perspective of 2020, many of Margaret's comments on the role of the Catholic church in Irish society were prescient. She urged the church authorities to 'understand the forces of secularisation' rather than appearing to be constantly condemning them. She recommended that they take a long-term perspective and to envisage what the church would do if the Irish state created a secular education system. She also believed that the idea of life as a celibate female religious was coming to an end and that the heads of Irish convents should consider carefully what to do with their ownership of extensive property in Dublin and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

In her support for remarriage, the use of contraceptives and recognition of gay rights, Margaret drew on her knowledge of history and theology. She recognised that church teaching on these issues was not as unchanged over the centuries as was claimed by some members of the Irish hierarchy. Margaret was not so much defying Catholic authorities as endeavouring to point the way to a more informed and open-minded approach to change that would also fulfil the hope and vision laid out in the Second Vatican Council. She was not an admirer of a secular society but wanted the Catholic church to play a role in the reforging of the spiritual values of Irish society 'outside of church walls'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Margaret MacCurtain's activism and views on the Catholic church in twentieth-century Ireland can be traced through the pages of the *Irish Times* online.

<sup>9</sup> See essays in *Metaphors for change* and her contribution to The Engage Debate (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2-W-EvkRiA>) (20 June 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Margaret MacCurtain's contribution to The Engage Debate.

Margaret never wrote about the scandal of clerical child abuse but she spoke about it and indicated her horror at the content of the Ferns and Ryan reports.<sup>11</sup> In a revealing interview towards the end of her life, she condemned the tendencies to hypocrisy and secrecy in Irish society, arguing that many people were aware of the abuse of children in institutions run by female religious and clerical sexual scandals long before they were publicly condemned by a religious or civic leader. Intriguingly, she speculated that the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation (confession) may have ‘let us out of a scrutiny of honesty’ as the priest in the confession box was prohibited from criticising or speaking about what he had heard while the confessor of sins could perceive themselves forgiven without any societal repercussions.<sup>12</sup>

Margaret clearly believed that speaking as a critical friend of the Catholic church was an important part of her spiritual mission. Nonetheless, it took considerable courage for a Dominican nun, initially, in full habit, to resist pressures to silence her. A well-known manifestation of this courage occurred in 1964 when Margaret rejected the request of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid to submit her lecture notes on the Counter-Reformation to him. Margaret, asserting her right to freedom of expression, stood her ground and her refusal was communicated to the Catholic prelate who did not pursue the issue.<sup>13</sup> Margaret also drew on her courage and determination in 1984 when she was appointed prioress of the Dominican community in Sion Hill. Her assurance that this was a spiritual role and perfectly compatible with her lecturing position was rejected by the authorities in U.C.D. Margaret, aware that many male colleagues held paid positions as political commentators and journalists, took the conflict to the High Court. After several days in court, the matter was eventually settled with the university backing down and Margaret retaining her position.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the profile of Margaret’s academic life includes most of the activities that universities now require of their staff: innovative thinking; excellent communication skills; dissemination of research to a non-academic audience; engagement with the media in its various forms; interesting methods for widening the impact of research and superb teaching evaluations from students.

Following her retirement from U.C.D., Margaret received greater recognition for her academic achievements. She was awarded a number of honorary degrees from universities in the United States and Ireland (Trinity College Dublin (2013) and Dublin City University (2015)); and in 2007, the National University of Ireland recognised her achievements with the conferring of a Doctor of Literature, its highest honour. Margaret also continued her public service and was a member of a number of statutory and government-funded committees including the Coimisiún ar Eagraíochtaí Deonacha na Gaeilge, the National Library of Ireland Society and the National Archives Advisory Council (which she chaired, 1997–2002).

No obituary of Margaret MacCurtain would be complete without a description of her friendly and welcoming personality. There are numerous stories of Margaret’s

<sup>11</sup> Francis D. Murphy *et al.*, *The Ferns report. Presented to the Minister for Health and Children, October 2005* (Dublin, 2005); *Commission to inquire into child abuse report [Ryan report]* (Dublin, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> ‘The troublesome nun’, Newstalk, 4 October 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Margaret MacCurtain, 28 Jan. 1999 (<http://www.tallgirlshorts.net/margary/margarettext.html>).

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, ‘Foreword’, pp 22–3.

acts of quiet kindness: thoughtful and, often very welcome, gifts or letters. Margaret was also great company and a stimulating conversationalist. She loved to hear news and gossip about friends and colleagues, albeit usually in an unmalignant and fun way. She would be the first to sympathise and to offer help to friends in difficulty.

Margaret's love of life was contagious. Her famed advice to those who sought her counsel was usually: 'Go for it!' — life affirming but also frequently daunting! It was rare to be long in Margaret's company before you began to smile. As her fellow Tudor historian, Ciarán Brady, commented, Margaret was 'one of those rare individuals who always made one feel better about being alive'.

In an *Irish Times* interview with the journalist, Christina Murphy, Margaret said that she had not given a great deal of thought to the afterlife but she hoped, in the words of the Catholic philosopher, Ivan Illich, at the 'moment of death ... to be surprised'.<sup>15</sup> Let us hope, she was!

<sup>15</sup> *Irish Times*, 17 May 1975.