

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Mary T. Brien

Diverse Cultural  
Contexts:  
The Weaving of  
Identity  
– *Reflections on  
Nano Nagle's  
Early Years*

October 2021

# Diverse Cultural Contexts: The Weaving of Identity

## – *Reflections on Nano Nagle’s Early Years*

---

Mary T. Brien

*“For those who love God all things work together for good,  
or those who are called according to his purposes.”*  
(Rom 8:28).

Nano Nagle (1718-1784) once asserted that if she could be of any service in any part of the world, she would willingly do all in her power.<sup>1</sup> This is an astonishing statement by a Catholic woman in eighteenth-century Ireland, when opportunities for involvement of Catholic women in public life, at home or abroad, were almost non-existent. Here is what her biographer, William Hutch, writing in 1875, has to say:

“She would spare no efforts in alleviating the temporal wants of her fellow-creatures ... Nor was her spirit of charity limited by any consideration of creed or country ... It was in purpose and effect cosmopolitan ...”<sup>2</sup>

Her view of mission knew no boundaries. Even though she is best-known as pioneer of Catholic education in Ireland in Penal times, her vision of Christian service extended far beyond the classroom and far beyond the era in which she lived. “My vision is not for one object alone”, she writes to her friend, Eleanor Fitzsimons, in 1770.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Letter to Eleanor Fitzsimons (1770), par.14. See also T. J. Walsh. *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1959),393, citing Coppinger, “Her zeal was so ardent ... that were it practicable, she would cheerfully have gone to the very extremities of the earth to promote the salvation of her fellow-creatures”.
- 2 W. D. Hutch. *Nano Nagle. Her life. Her Labours and Their Fruits* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1875), 97.
- 3 Walsh, Appendix A, 344. Letters of Nano Nagle, No. 1.

---

Mary T. Brien is a Presentation Sister of the South-West Province, Ireland. She teaches Sacred Scripture in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

## THE FURROW

Her life and writings exemplify this *global* perspective.<sup>4</sup> The first sixteen years of Nano Nagle's life will be considered here in a two-phased study. The *first* phase will examine her childhood years to age ten in Ballygriffin, near Mallow, in County Cork. The *second*, from age ten to age sixteen, will focus on her life in a boarding school in mainland Europe. In considering the wealth of multi-cultural experience afforded her and the unusual opportunities that came her way, it may be argued that such opportunities fostered a breadth of vision and an understanding of diversity unusual for a young person in eighteenth-century rural Ireland. It may also be suggested that the array of multi-cultural experiences with which she was gifted in her early years may have been foundational in weaving the identity of the woman of global vision whom we now know Nano Nagle to be.

### CHILDHOOD YEARS

Born, in 1718, into the wealthy and well-known branch of the Nagle family in Ballygriffin, Nano was the eldest of seven children – five girls and two boys. On her mother's side she was descended from the Mathews of Thomastown and Lady Thurles. She lived her entire life under the shadow of the Penal Laws, which were not repealed until 1791, seven years after her death. Under that cruel regime, it was difficult and often impossible for Catholics to practise their faith. They were forbidden to teach in a school or to facilitate the education of their children. Severe penalties were imposed on anyone who defied the laws or attempted to send children abroad for education. William Hutch, one of Nano's earliest biographers, states that the Nagle children received their early education at home:

- 4 She is founder of the first native Congregation of Religious Women to be established in Ireland since the time of St Brigid (451-525). She used all of her wealth in the establishment of two Religious Congregations, Ursulines and Presentation, and in the maintenance of seven schools in Cork City. She found ways of transforming the slave trade and the commercial links between Cork and the West Indies into opportunities for the training of young boys as educators of the poor in faraway lands. She had a house built as shelter for homeless women. She purchased a plot in St Finbarr's Cemetery, so that these women could have a dignified burial and their names recorded. She envisioned a home for 'ladies of the night', although she died before accomplishing it. Her daily schedule consisted of three hours in prayer each morning, daily treks across the city on foot in all weathers to her secret schools, teaching Christian doctrine to the children she had rescued from the streets. Each evening she trudged through the dark and crime-ridden lanes of Cork city, by the light of a lantern, to bring comfort to the housebound, the sick and the dying. According to the *Annalist*, "There was not a garret in Cork that she did not know." Canonically she is declared founder of two Congregations in Ireland, Ursulines and Presentation Sisters. She is also credited with inspiring several ministerial Religious Congregations of women and of men in the decades after her death.

“Nano Nagle received from her parents the rudiments of her religious and literary education ... they imparted to their child such liberal, secular training as was suited to her years”.<sup>5</sup>

It is probable that Nano’s parents, Garret and Anne Nagle, employed a tutor (possibly a wandering schoolmaster or poet)<sup>6</sup> or perhaps more than one, to ensure the best of home-schooling for Nano and her siblings in their early years. This would have been the norm for well-to-do families at the time. There is anecdotal evidence that Nano attended the nearby hedge-school in the ruins of Monanimy Castle, which her famous cousin Edmund Burke also attended in his early years. That hedge-school was run by a Mr O’Halloran, and all teaching was through Irish. Daniel Corkery, author of *The Hidden Ireland*, makes an assertion surely worth noting:

“If one could, with imaginative assurance ... enter the Nagle family home – a house where Irish was spoken to their Kerry labourers and English to their visitors from Dublin ... then one should be qualified to tell the story of Ireland in the eighteenth century...”<sup>7</sup>

English was the second language spoken by the privileged few, among whom Nano’s family may be counted. Many of the Nagles, including Nano’s uncles, served in high office and in legal circles. When King James was defeated in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne, Sir Richard Nagle (1636-1699)<sup>8</sup> accompanied the defeated King to France and became Secretary of State at the Court of St Germaine. This same Richard was Speaker in the Irish Parliament and later Attorney General. Since English was the only language tolerated in the law courts from 1537, strengthened by another law in 1541<sup>9</sup>, it is reasonable to assume that English was spoken regularly among families with legal connections at home and abroad, such

5 Hutch, 6.

6 It is known that Eoghan Rua O’Súilleabháin was tutor to a Nagle family in Castle Hyde, near Fermoy, and that others such as Seán ó Coileáin, Donnacha Rua Mac Namara and Aindrias Mac Craith were known as wandering teachers. “All spoke and wrote in the native tongue”. Walsh, p.15.

7 Daniel Corkery. *The Hidden Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1924), 8.

8 Sir Richard Nagle, uncle to Garrett Nagle, settled in France and died there.

9 In 1537 with *The Statute of Ireland – An Act for the English Order Habit and Language* prohibited the use of the Irish language in the Irish Parliament. In 1541, further legislation was passed which banned the use of Irish in the areas of Ireland then under English rule. The Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) was passed by the Irish Parliament in 1737. The Act not only forbids the speaking of Irish within the courtroom; it also prohibits the completion of legal documentation in Irish and imposes a financial penalty of £20 each time Irish is spoken in court in contravention of the law.

as Mathews and Nagles. It would also have been the language used by the merchant class to whom many Nagles belonged.<sup>10</sup>

However, because of the many links between the Nagles and Continental Europe, it is reasonable to assume that French was not an unfamiliar language in the Ballygriffin home. It is known that Garret Nagle had extensive business interests in Flanders and that he was agent for the exiled King James there. In fact, he and Anne Mathew were married in Flanders, and two of the Nagle children were born there. Garret Nagle lived in Flanders for many years and is not known to have lived in Ireland after 1728, although he did make some return visits.<sup>11</sup> In all probability, he is buried in Flanders.<sup>12</sup> Church records show that he acted as sponsor for two of the children of Jacques Nagle, son of Sir Richard Nagle, in the Cathedral at Lilles in 1723 and 1731, respectively. The same Sir Richard managed Garret Nagle's business affairs in Flanders during Garret Nagle's absence in Ireland.<sup>13</sup>

From all of this it is reasonable to conclude that Nano had something like a tri-lingual and multi-cultural upbringing during her years in Ballygriffin, even perhaps some multi-lingual experience, where Irish, English, French and even Spanish and Germanic languages, were part of everyday discourse.<sup>14</sup>

The Nagles of Ballygriffin were staunchly Catholic, as were the Mathews of Thomastown, but many of Nano's cousins on both sides had become crypto-Catholic, adopting the Protestant faith publicly to preserve their property and to avoid persecution, while secretly professing the Catholic faith. Quite a few of the Mathews were Freemasons. Nano's uncle Joseph professed the Protestant faith, at least ostensibly, while supporting the Catholic education projects of his niece. Nano's famous cousin, Edmund Burke, professed the Protestant faith, as did many of the extended families of Mathews and Nagles. Nano grew up in a truly unconventional setting, with relatives on both sides registered as practising Protestants, even though some were only nominally so.

10 Yet at least some members of the Cork merchant class prided themselves on being fluent speakers of French. "They received their education in the schools and convents of France; in their exclusive circle, 'not to speak French like a native' was a social defect." Sarah Atkinson, cited in Walsh, 18.

11 See Footnote 13.

12 Since there is no memorial gravestone bearing the name of Garret Nagle in Ballygriffin or in Mourneabbey, the traditional burial place of the Nagles, it is most likely that Garret Nagle is buried in Flanders. Acknowledgements to Sr Assumpta O'Neill pbvm, who has researched the issue.

13 Deirdre Rafferty, Catriona Delaney and Catherine Nolan-Roebuck. *Nano Nagle. The Life and the Legacy* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2019), 16.

14 Because Flanders, at that time, was battle-ground between Hapsburgs, French and Spanish interests, and because so many of the Nagles had made their home in Spain, the question of spoken language among Nagles is complex. I acknowledge my debt to my colleague, Sr Ursula Lawler, for alerting me to the complexity involved.

## DIVERSE CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The young Nano could not avoid being influenced by the poverty all around her among tenants, servants, and neighbours, and by the contrast between her life and theirs. George Berkeley (1685-1753), Bishop of Cloyne, writing in 1749, describes the destitution typical of the Irish countryside in the eighteenth century:

“The house of the Irish peasant is the cave of poverty...In every road the ragged ensigns of poverty are displayed. You often meet caravans of poor, whole families in a drove, without clothes to cover or bread to feed them...”<sup>15</sup>

By comparison with most of her neighbours, Nano experienced relative luxury, even while adult members of her family feared for their lives and liberty, many having been deprived of their property and possessions. Many others – a majority in fact – had been forced to emigrate. She grew up in family circles where migration and international travel were the order of the day.

Nano Nagle was connected to royalty through her parents on both sides. From her mother’s side, a direct line can be established between Nano and Elizabeth Poyntz, Lady Thurles, whose second marriage was to Captain George Mathew. The late Princess Diana Spenser as well as the present Prince Charles of England can both claim direct descendancy from Viscount and Lady Thurles through the Duke of Ormond. So, on that score, Nano is related to both Lady Diana Spenser and to Prince Charles of England. Moreover, the established links between the Nagles and King James II are hugely important, and their influence on young Nano cannot be ignored. Garret Nagle was agent for the Stuarts in Flanders and collected money in Ireland for the Stuart cause. Several of the Nagles served in the shadow court of St Germain-en-Laye, where the exiled King James and his wife, Mary of Modena, lived for many years, courtesy of Louis XIV, after the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688. Many Jacobites, including Nano’s relatives, continued to live there until 1793, just as rumblings of the French Revolution were in the air. A gold ring, with royal insignia, gift of James Stuart to a lady of the Nagle family (probably Nano’s mother), was among the few treasures found among Nano’s possessions after her death.

## EDUCATION

At the age of ten (as was the custom among well-to-do Catholic families in Ireland at the time), Nano was sent abroad, smuggled

15 George Berkeley. *A Word to the Wise* (Dublin: Faulkner, 1749). See Walsh, 7. Ballygriffin is within 60 KM of Cloyne, and part of the same diocese. Berkeley’s description of peasant poverty in the eighteenth century is, therefore, quite applicable to the Mallow and Ballygriffin areas.

out of the port of Cork probably on a merchant ship, to continue her education. All early biographers of Nano, including Coppinger, mention that she went to Paris, where she had many relatives serving in the court of the exiled King James. Her stay in Paris, at this stage, must have been brief because all biographers agree that she left Ballygriffin at age ten, and reliable written evidence states that she was in boarding school elsewhere from age ten to sixteen. The secrecy surrounding Nano's movements and her education abroad is understandable, given the severe penalties imposed on anyone who dared to flout the Penal Laws.

But *where* was Nano educated between age ten and age sixteen? Up to 1969, it was generally thought that she was educated either in the Benedictine Convent at Fontevrault in Western France, where she had two Kearney cousins, or else in the prestigious Convent of St Cyr in Paris. The jury was out on the issue for almost two centuries, until an important letter was discovered in 1969. Because of that letter, we now know that Nano was educated in the Benedictine Convent at Ypres, about 50km west of Brussels. Today the town of Ypres is Flemish-speaking, part of the Province of West Flanders in Belgium. In Nano's time it was contested area, largely, but not exclusively, French speaking. So many Irish women belonged to that Benedictine community at Ypres, that it was known as the Royal Irish Abbey at Ypres, and it merited a worthy and extensive 536-page history by Patrick Nolan OSB, entitled *The Irish Dames of Ypres*.<sup>16</sup> While that book does not mention Nano Nagle or her schooling, it does give the history of the Benedictine girls' boarding school, from its foundation in 1665 until 1888.<sup>17</sup> This educational establishment was eagerly sought by those Irish families who desired a worthy education for their daughters.<sup>18</sup> The community in Ypres, at one stage, consisted entirely of Irish members. The list of surnames is interesting: Kearney, Gould, O'Connell, Lombard, Butler, Lynch, O'Brien, Creagh, McArthur, and Nagle. Records of the Benedictines of Kylemore (linked historically with Ypres) show that there were two Nagles (perhaps blood sisters?) in the Ypres community in the 18th century during Nano's time there. Dame Mechtilde Nagle, professed 1738, died in 1752, aged 31 years,

16 Patrick Nolan, *The Irish Dames of Ypres* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908).

17 Nolan, writing in 1908, could not access materials from the Abbey Annals after 1810. See Nolan, 313.

18 The Benedictine community at Ypres was founded from Ghent in 1665 by Lady Mary Percy, daughter of Blessed Thomas Percy. Originally intended to serve the needs of English families, it soon became known for the numbers of Irish applicants in the 17th and 18th centuries. Jack Rooney, in his recent study of the Irish Dames of Ypres writes, "The Abbey of Our Lady of Grace, in Rue St Jacques, attracted the daughters of wealthy Irish families in the centuries that followed." See website of Kylemore Abbey Connemara, Ireland.

and Dame Antonio Nagle, also professed 1738, died 1795, aged 73 years.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Benedictine convent at Ypres was owned and financed by an Irish consortium of Stuart supporters, among whom we can surely count some Nagles.<sup>20</sup> This provides strong evidence that the daughters of Garret Nagle would be welcome at the Royal Benedictine Abbey at Ypres. But the strongest evidence that Nano was a boarder there, comes from a letter written in 1969 by Maureen Stewart (later Dame Bernard OSB) to Sister Camillus Galvin of Presentation Convent, Fargo, ND.<sup>21</sup> In that letter, Dame Bernard states that when she (Dame Bernard) was a boarder in Ypres (1908 to 1912), before joining the community there, she was told by the Abbess, Dame Josephine Fletcher, in 1908, that Nano Nagle, foundress of the Presentation Sisters, was educated at that school. A relevant extract from the letter is worth quoting because it tells us quite a few important things about Nano's education at the Abbey.

“When I went to school at Ypres in October 1908 Dame Josephine Fletcher told me that Nano Nagle, the foundress of the Presentation nuns (*sic* Order), was educated here ... In 1728 she was sent to school at Ypres. She was ten years old when she came, and according to the Constitution, she left at the age of sixteen... Dame Ignatia Goulde was Mistress of Pensioners (*sic* Boarders). She was related to the Nagles, as were several of the community ...”<sup>22</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Nano Nagle received an education worthy of her status at the Benedictine Abbey at Ypres. Educated through the medium of English, and in the company of students from a variety of backgrounds, her early teenage years were characterised by an experience of cultural diversity unknown to many of her peers.<sup>23</sup>

A few other factors are worth mentioning in relation to Nano's years in Ypres. *Firstly*, there is the Jesuit influence with its accompanying Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. “In 1704

19 T.J. Walsh, p 38. Footnote 12.

20 The gold ring was given to Nano's mother or grandmother by King James and bears his signature seal, JS, with a lock of his hair.

21 Author of *From Acorn to Oak. A Study of Presentation Foundations 1775-1968* (Fargo ND: Presentation Publications, 1969).

22 The original of that letter in its entirety is in the archives of Presentation Convent, Fargo North Dakota. A copy of the Prospectus of the Benedictine Abbey at Ypres, dated 1784, is located in the archives of Presentation Convent, George's Hill, Dublin. See Criostóir O Floinn, *Lóchrann Dóchais (Ath Cliath: FAS 2005)*, 60.

23 The authenticity of that letter of 1969 has been disputed. Thanks to a conversation between Sr Rosaria Action PBVM of Fargo and the author in 2013, there is no doubt whatsoever about the authenticity of the 1969 letter.

## THE FURROW

Devotion to the Sacred Heart had been officially established (at the school) and the pupils were enrolled ...”<sup>24</sup> Of Jesuit priest, Fr Dalas SJ, some decades later, we are told that he was ‘director of the Convent and of the boarders’ and that he erected a Confraternity in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with authorisation from the Bishop of Ypres in 1780. Of course, Nano was back in Ireland then, but the letter of Dame Bernard Stewart already cited states that “Nano established the devotion in Cork”. That devotion got official recognition by Pope Clement XIII in 1765. Nolan states

“In 1704, during the Octave of Corpus Christi, a retreat was preached to the Ypres community by Fr. Louis Sabran SJ. He had been a companion of Blessed Claude de la Colombière at the court of Saint James and was then stationed at Paray le Monial. He preached on devotion to the Sacred Heart ... In 1720 the entire community, with the chaplain, Mr. Jeremy O’Donnell, joined a confraternity established with Episcopal approval, by the Jesuits at Bruges. Finally, in 1732, when the Archconfraternity was established in Rome, the community and their pupils were enrolled, and a private association was established in the school to promote the devotion among the pupils ...”<sup>25</sup>

Nano Nagle was surely among that student cohort. Devotion to the Sacred Heart was a distinctive feature of her spirituality in later life. According to Nolan,

“The Irish Dames were one of the first communities outside France to introduce devotion to the Sacred Heart after its establishment at Paray-le-Monial ...”<sup>26</sup>

Even a superficial glance at the writings of Nano Nagle will reveal traces of the Jesuit influence on her spirituality. Constantly searching for ‘the Divine will’, her efforts, as she repeatedly says, are directed, towards ‘the greater glory of God’. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is important to her. She names her fledgling community ‘Sisters of Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus’, and her first residence in Cork was known as ‘The House

24 Letter of Dame Bernard Stewart OSB of Kylemore Abbey to Sr Camillus Galvin in Presentation Convent Fargo, 1969.

25 Excerpt from 1969 letter already cited.

26 Nolan, *Ibid.*, 351. However, through the Brigidine Sisters in Kildare, whose first directress was also a boarder in Ypres at the same time as Nano Nagle, devotion to the Sacred Heart was promoted in Kildare Diocese. P. Kelly states that “the devotion was brought to Ireland around 1752 (to Dungarvan).” See *Presentation Sisters, Reflecting with Nano* (Swords: Levins Print, 2009), 56, with Note.

of the Sacred Heart'. Even though she does not explicitly mention St Ignatius, the Society of Jesus, or the Spiritual Exercises in her writings, Jesuit influence features strongly in her spirituality, as does devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Her years as a boarder in the Benedictine Abbey in Ypres cannot be discounted as formative of that spirituality.

The Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple was the named school feast-day in the Benedictine Convent in Ypres, and it was solemnly celebrated each year. It was also the day on which Jesuits took final vows. The Letter of 1969 states that "The Presentation (of Mary) was the school feast at Ypres". Devotion to Mary, under the title of Our Lady of the Presentation, was widespread in Europe during the Middle Ages, and later. From Byzantium it spread to France and the low Countries. The Benedictine Abbey at Ypres solemnly celebrated the Feast of Mary's Presentation each year. It is not surprising therefore that, in 1791 (seven years after Nano's death), Fr Lawrence Callanan, advised by the community, made application to Rome for the name of the fledgeling Congregation to be re-named Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary because, as he states, "Nano was ever known to have a particular devotion to Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Presentation".<sup>28</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the formative years of Nano Nagle (to age sixteen) were marked by combinations of Irish, English, Jacobite, Flemish, French, Germanic, Benedictine, Jesuit, Byzantine and possibly other influences. Her childhood years in Ballygriffin and her education later in an exclusive and culturally diverse boarding school in Ypres possibly nurtured in her a resilience above the ordinary and a vision remarkably broad and diverse. It may be argued that the foundations of that missionary zeal, wide as the world, which characterised Nano Nagle's later life, were laid down in her early years. Her own unwavering faith in Divine Providence would support this view.<sup>29</sup> The finger of God, so obviously at work in weaving a cross-cultural path for Nano Nagle in her childhood and teenage years, continued to create, in later years, a multi-

27 For more on Jesuit influence on Nano Nagle, see M.T. O'Brien "For the Greater Glory of God: A Reflection on the Jesuit Influence on Nano Nagle" in Bernadette Flanagan, Mary T. O'Brien and Anne O'Leary (eds.) *Nano Nagle and an Evolving Charism. A Guide for Educators, Leaders and Care Providers* (Dublin: Veritas, 2017).

28 Annals of south Presentation Convent, Cork.

29 From her letters, several examples are available. For example, "Providence has ordered everything for the best." (Letter No. 4. 1770); "It is all His work and has not been effected by human means" (Letter No.1. 1769).

## THE FURROW

faceted tapestry where many varied shades and shapes and designs were pressed into the service of the Good News. In her words, “The Almighty permits everything for the best ... His divine Hand will uphold us.”<sup>30</sup>

### NOTE

This reflection is planned as the *first* in a series attempting to document aspects of the hidden life of Nano Nagle. The author will warmly welcome any assistance with the next phase, those years spent in the courtly and royal realms of Paris (1734-1746 approximately).

30 Letter No. 4. (1770).

**The Joy of Youth!** Young people are not meant to become discouraged; they are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better. That is why I constantly urge young people not to let themselves be robbed of hope; to each of them I repeat: ‘Let no one despise your youth’ (1 Tm 4:12).

– POPE FRANCIS, *Christ is Alive*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 11.