

The Founding of the Irish Christian Brothers: Navigating the Realities through the Myths

Denis McLaughlin

Abstract: *The documentation undertaken for Blessed Edmund Rice's canonisation processes indicate that his motivations in founding his religious congregation (the Irish Christian Brothers) was ignited by a Pastoral Letter of Bishop Thomas Hussey urging Catholics to combat Protestant proselytism of the poor. He is said to have responded by educating boys using a blueprint for girls pioneered by the founder of the Presentation Sisters, Nano Nagle. This "myth" was a dominant theme in pre-canonisation homilies at masses in the Vatican. This paper argues that these motivations cannot be sustained from the historical evidence.*

Key Words: Edmund Rice – conversion and vocation; Irish Christian Brothers – foundation; Bishop Thomas Hussey; Presentation Sisters; Nano Nagle

Currently, there is renewed and robust historical scholarship exploring educational contributions made by Catholic religious congregations throughout the world. O'Donoghue¹ and MacGinley² have critiqued their influence in Australia, Perko³ in America, Collins⁴ in New Zealand and Walsh⁵ in England and Wales. The irony is that this interest is occurring at a time when there has been a substantial and dramatic decline of personnel in religious orders, in western countries, particularly with those engaged in education.⁶

However, the situation was dramatically different, two centuries ago. The beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed an expansion of education throughout Europe in general,⁷ and Ireland in particular.⁸ The initiative in Ireland was led by both Catholic⁹ and Protestant¹⁰ Churches. The Catholic Church used personnel from the newly founded Irish

¹ T. O'Donoghue, *Upholding the Faith: The Process of Education in Catholic Schools in Australia, 1922-1965* (New York: P. Lang, 2001).

² M.R. MacGinley, *A Dynamic of Hope: Institutes of Women Religious in Australia* (Sydney: Crossing Press, 1996).

³ F. Perko, "Religious Schooling in America: A Historiographic Reflection," *History of Education Quarterly* 40.3 (2000): 320-338.

⁴ J. Collins, "Hidden Lives: The Teaching and Religious Lives of Eight Dominican Sisters, 1931-1961" (MEd thesis, Massey University, New Zealand, 2001).

⁵ B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales 1800-1937* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002).

⁶ P. Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994).

⁷ W. Boyd and E. King, *The History of Western Education* (London: A. and C. Black, 1975).

⁸ J. Coolahan, *Irish Education: History and Structure* (Dublin: Institute of Public Education, 1985).

⁹ P. Corish, *The Irish Catholic experience: A Historical Survey* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 190-1.

¹⁰ K. Milne, *The Irish Charter Schools, 1730-1830* (Oxford: Four Courts, 1997).

religious orders,¹¹ to be the vanguard in its educational pioneering initiatives. Such a phenomenon was occurring throughout Europe and in the newly opening mission colonies in Asia, Africa and Oceania. Indeed, the nineteenth century was to witness a major revival of the religious life in the Catholic church in Europe with over six hundred orders being founded in this century,¹² most of which were involved in the Church's education apostolate.

THE NEED TO ADOPT A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Much of the documented history concerning religious orders has perpetuated a tradition of hagiography, where dirty linen was never washed in private let alone in public, and incidents and issues that might be construed as disedifying to the Order's membership and/or the Catholic Church generally, were excised or the facts massaged into a more virtuous version. A small but growing body of researchers is adopting a more rigorous and scholarly approach to this area of study,¹³ often enough generating controversial findings. The major challenge for such historians is to energetically question, scrutinise, and review received interpretations generated from within religious orders, in order to test the facts and myths. This ambivalence with accuracy can be a particular issue in the case of the founders of religious orders, who tend to be not only eulogized by the membership, but indeed reified; this possibly being a fail-safe prerequisite for the Vatican's nod for eventual canonisation.

Rigorously addressing such realities in this area makes the search tedious, for the process of rediscovery, while eventually satisfying, is very much akin to dogged detective work,¹⁴ largely because of the dearth of available research material. This is because some of this material has been deliberately destroyed at worst, or at best deodorized, if not sanitized.

The process of professional and impartial enquiry is important because the integrity of the founder's charism is said to be the cultural touchstone of many Catholic schools. Charism in the Catholic culture means that the extraordinary qualities of religious leaders or founders of religious institutes are seen as being special gifts to the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit for the good of the People of God.¹⁵ Pope Paul VI insists that such gifts from God should not be ignored and reminds institutions of their obligation "to be faithful to the spirit of their founder, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity."¹⁶ Catholic schools are currently searching for an authentic identity and its

¹¹ The Presentation Sisters were founded in 1775; the Christian and Presentation Brothers in 1802; the Brigidine Sisters in 1807; the Patrician Brothers in 1808; the Sisters of Charity in 1815; the Sisters of Loreto 1821 and the Sisters of Mercy in 1831. These were all engaged in education.

¹² G. Arbuckle, *From Chaos to Mission: Refounding Religious Life Formation* (Sydney: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), 27.

¹³ M. Magray, *The Transforming Power of Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900* (Oxford: OUP, 1998); T. O'Donoghue, *Come Follow Me and Forsake Temptation: Catholic Schooling and the Recruitment and Retention of Religious Teaching Orders, 1922-1965* (Bern: P. Lang, 2004).

¹⁴ W. Warren, "The Historian as a 'Private eye'," *Historical Studies* 9 (1974), citing G. Young, *Last Essays 1950*, 112.

¹⁵ Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and the Congregation for Bishops, *Mutuae Relationes* (1978), par.11.

¹⁶ Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life*, in A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1 (New York: Dominican, 1996), par.11.

accompanying integrity.¹⁷ Consequently, the articulation of “the charism of the founder and the spirit of the order are intended to be a significant influence upon the culture and work of those Catholic schools derived from these traditions and origins.”¹⁸

This paper explores the mythologies surrounding the foundation of one religious congregation, the Irish Christian Brothers. The Christian Brothers’ were founded in 1802 by Edmund Ignatius¹⁹ Rice, the former wealthy Waterford merchant, to educate primarily the children of the abject poor. By any benchmark his endeavours were acclaimed as successful:

Take Waterford for instance. The poor are taught by lay-monks vowed to poverty and the education of the poor; and by Nuns who rival the Christian Brothers in zeal and efficiency. The poor are instructed and the Catholic churches are thronged to suffocation by pious worshippers in rags. Drunkenness is utterly unknown. Crime is decreasing; the jails are emptying, the character of crimes committed is becoming lighter and disease is decreasing among the poor. But the most remarkable fact with regard to the moral condition of Waterford is this – the knowledge of religion is so universal and the dispositions to practice its obligation so general that Waterford is a Christian city.²⁰

Though a thoroughly religious culture permeated their schools, the Brothers introduced their boys to a pragmatic curriculum that promoted a robust social mobility. The following extract from the Cork Almanac of 1827 provides a flavour of the curriculum offered by the Christian Brothers as well as the benefits gained by the students. It is clearly not typical of poor schools at the time.

Their system embraces every branch of elementary knowledge necessary for accountants, shopkeepers and mechanics with religious and moral instruction which is conveyed on principles suitable to the capacity of youth. Many useful and valuable members of society remarkable for piety, good conduct, and scientific and literary information have been formed in the Schools of this establishment. The funds are partly derived from subscriptions and an annual charity sermon on the fifth Sunday of Lent.²¹

The Christian Brothers followed the Irish diaspora and opened up schools in most parts of the English speaking World (England, 1825; Gibraltar, 1835; Australia, 1843; Canada, 1876; India, 1890; South Africa, 1895; Rome, 1900; United States, 1906).²² They became the largest male religious order in both Ireland and Australia. The Order’s membership numbers peaked in 1965, when it reached 3,709. The current membership is approximately 1,500 Brothers, while there are approximately 120,000 students being educated in Christian Brothers’ establishments throughout the world.²³

If the education Rice provided is to be genuinely understood, it is important to appreciate the motivations held by Edmund Rice, when he felt compelled to commence his initial education enterprise. The extant literature suggests that he was inspired by the work of the Presentation Sisters and was motivated to replicate for boys what Nagle’s followers were doing for girls. Another motivation was said to be a call of Thomas Hussey,

¹⁷ D. McLaughlin, *The Catholic School: Paradoxes and Challenges* (Sydney: St. Pauls, 2000).

¹⁸ G. Grace, *Catholic Schools: Missions, Markets and Morality* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 129.

¹⁹ Edmund Rice’s religious community name was Ignatius.

²⁰ *London Tablet*, 4th March, 1843.

²¹ Cited in P.J. Hennessy, *A Century of Catholic Education* (Dublin: Brown & Nolan, 1916), 26.

²² The Christian Brothers, *Centenary of Edmund Ignatius Rice, Founder of the Christian Brothers of Ireland* (Dublin, 1944).

²³ Personal communications with Christian Brothers’ archivists in Rome and Sydney, June, 2005.

Bishop of Waterford to counteract the proselytizing of Catholic children by Protestant educational agencies. This paper challenges these traditional assertions as major motivating factors influencing Rice. Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is to explore what were the real influences that motivated Rice to initiate his teaching brotherhood.

The Search for Meaning

Rice was devastated by the death of his wife “and felt her death most keenly,”²⁴ but he became reconciled to the will of God through prayer.²⁵ Indeed, the deep love Rice had for his wife is reflected in the naming of his daughter in his wife’s honour and memory. Her life continued in the surviving child. Indeed, she left an indelible presence within Rice’s psyche, a phenomenon he referred to, some thirty five years after her death. In 1836, reflecting on his unique intimacy with his wife and the devastating wound her death caused him, Rice wrote about a young, recently made widow in the following compassionate and personal terms: “I wrote poor Mary (Kirwan) a letter yesterday. May the Lord help her. She is now to know the dregs of misery and misfortune. I pity the poor Mother. It will break her heart.”²⁶

What is important to acknowledge is that it was “the death of his young wife in 1789 (that) marked a pivotal point in the spiritual life of Edmund Rice.”²⁷ The Waterford evidence asserts that they appeared to have been an exceptionally close couple and Mary’s death catapulted Rice into a prolonged major depression that was catalytic in Rice reassessing his life: “...from this period it is possible to identify an increased religious and social consciousness”²⁸ in Rice’s psyche. This key event in Rice’s life compelled him to focus and depth a verse of scripture that regularly threads its way in the letters, documents and oral traditions concerning Edmund Rice: “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”²⁹ Moreover, the reality of death became a constant companion for Rice around this time. His father, Robert, had died in 1787. In 1795 his youngest brother, the seventeen year old Michael died. Michael was apprenticed to Rice, and was living with him, Joan and the infant Mary. Likewise, his uncle Michael, who in many ways was Rice’s second father died in the same year.

²⁴ Mary Whittle, 2nd July, 1949, provided this information given to her by her grandmother, who regularly visited her Waterford relatives; cited in M.C. Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice* (Dublin: Christian Brothers, 1979), 327.

²⁵ Quotation of Waterford citizens; cited in A.L. O’Toole, *A Spiritual Profile of Edmund Rice: More than Silver or Gold*, vol. 1 (Bristol: Burleigh, 1984), 40.

²⁶ M.C. Normoyle, *A Companion to a Tree is Planted* (Dublin: Christian Brothers, 1977), 495.

²⁷ D. Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1996), 35.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁹ Rice deliberately put this verse in his 1832 Rule (ch 2 art 2). There is no similar verse in the Presentation Rule. The De La Salle Constitutions (ch.2) quotes it but Rice changes the De La Salle citation to personalize it and adds a further final verse acknowledging faith in God’s compassionate care. “The Lord gave” to me “the Lord taketh away” from me: “as it hath pleased the Lord, so is it to be done: Blessed be the name of the Lord” (cf. A.L. O’Toole, *Spirit of the Institute*, ed. F.R. Hickey, Inheritance, Collection One [Rome, 1982], 126): “It comes through often in the life of Edmund and he “used it as a prayer right up to the last days of his life.” (J.A. Houlihan, *Overcoming Evil with Good: The Edmund Rice Story* [New Rochelle: Iona College, 1997], 145 n.17). This prayer and its regularity in Rice’s life provide significant insight into, not only into the Job-like suffering, despondencies and depressions he experienced but also the compassionate trust in a loving Father, he nurtured throughout his life. Rice quotes it to Br Patrick Corbett in a letter dated 3rd July, 1835; cited in Normoyle, *Companion to a Tree is Planted*, 461.

Rice was unable to care adequately for his baby daughter, so he invited his spinster half-sister Joan (Murphy) to be housekeeper for him and to share parenting for Mary. His brother, John ten years Edmund's junior, soon joined the family to try his hand as an apprentice in the business, but in 1792 at about the age of twenty, pursued his vocation as an Augustinian friar initially in Callan and then in Rome.

From about 1790, Rice was one of five prosperous young businessmen,³⁰ who "formed a society for living more active Christian lives."³¹

At this time in Waterford, when he was a businessman, there was a very early Mass at the Cathedral in winter and summer, perhaps at 6 o'clock. He was present at it and he went to frequent if not daily Communion. At the time very few were going to frequent communion....To the best of my belief I heard that he said the Office of the Church daily. It might have been the Office of the Blessed Virgin as he was very devout to the Mother of God.³²

For anyone taking the inner journey seriously, reflective reading especially of the scriptures becomes a regular and necessary structure, indeed a lifelong habit.³³ So it is not surprising that Rice subscribed to the 1791 Dublin imprint of the "Doway" (sic) Bible.³⁴ This decision by Rice has been described as "the most significant event in the whole of his spiritual life"³⁵ in that his incipient faith became grounded and nurtured by his regular reflections on God's word,³⁶ something relatively unusual for Irish Catholics of the time.³⁷ From this time on, the reading of scriptures became a daily habit for Rice for nurturing and guiding his spiritual life.³⁸ Brother Joseph Norris's recollections of the elderly Rice provides insights into the biblical spirituality of the man:

The next time I met him was when I entered the Novitiate at Mount Sion, Waterford, in 1841. He gave me a warm welcome. Here I live with him up to 1844. I was appointed to attend on him at his meals, helping him up the stairs to his bed-room after his breakfast. I had to fix his chair, if in winter near the fire, place the Holy Bible before him which he read for a considerable time daily.³⁹

O'Toole comments on Rice's choice of spiritual reading⁴⁰ thus:

Always pride of place was held by his Bible, and his equally well thumbed copy of A Kempis (Imitation of Christ). The daily reading of these two favourite volumes fed his devotion with highest ideals and motives.⁴¹

³⁰ Messrs Brien, Carroll, Quan and St Ledger. Mr. Brien (sometimes written as O'Brien) joined Rice and founded the Carrick house. (The spelling "Brien" is written in his will) (M.C. Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted* [Dublin: Christian Brothers, 1976], 28). It was to Mr. Quan that Rice sold his business when he commenced his educational ministry in earnest.

³¹ Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844*, 31.

³² Mary O'Reilly, 3rd June, 1913; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 228-229.

³³ See Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

³⁴ For interesting and background reading concerning this topic see: R.C. Hill, "Edmund Rice's Bible," *Our Studies* 39.1 (1966): 44-45.

³⁵ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:42

³⁶ *Ibid*, 1:248.

³⁷ Hill, "Edmund Rice's Bible," 45.

³⁸ A Christian Brother (W.M. McCarthy), *Edmund Ignatius Rice and the Christian Brothers* (Dublin: Gill, 1926), 55.

³⁹ Br Joseph Norris, 25th March, 1912; cited in Normoyle *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 214.

⁴⁰ For an illuminative understanding of the spiritual underpinnings of Rice's choice of reading in its historical and Gaelic context see O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:245-248.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 1:87.

In addition, Rice subscribed to the publication of the 1793, Waterford edition of *The Spiritual Combat*, a classic guide to the inner life, highly prized by St Francis de Sales, because it “reduces its maxims to practice.”⁴² It was dedicated to all those who sought true piety themselves and were ready to promote it in others. The author of the *Combat* was Lawrence Scupoli an Italian, who like Rice embraced the religious life later in life at the age of forty. No doubt the book’s organized structure covering eighty one chapters “provided a methodological approach to the spiritual life congenial to his (Rice) ordered business mind.”⁴³

The Call to Serve

Rice’s inward quest deepened his appreciation that to follow Jesus has by definition communal imperatives:

Every true follower of Jesus is profoundly affected by an encounter with God and, in response, radical Christians become lovers of humanity and become...more socially active... Therefore no authentic disciple can be satisfied with a comfortable, private “me-and-Jesus” relationship. And no Christian can attempt to influence others’ lives, much less presume to preach to them, unless he or she has first experienced a relationship with the God of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

In Ireland at this time there was a uniquely lay phenomenon, which was lay led and lay conducted. This phenomenon is described by an early Brother historian:

At this town there existed in some towns in Ireland communities of men, commonly called “Monks.” They followed their trade, or cultivated land, and observed certain religious exercises. ...(T)heir lives were edifying and their example was most salutary to the Catholic people.⁴⁵

In their pursuit of undertaking works of charity, many laymen, “Monks” assisted in providing some education for the poorest of the children. This lay spirituality extended itself to lay people committing themselves to religious sodalities. Rice was attracted to join such sodalities. Both were the Jesuit sponsored, Sacred Heart Confraternity and the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin.

This (Marian) sodality provided a definite rule of life under the guidance of a spiritual director. Members had to make a retreat each year. The rules of the sodality mentioned especially the visiting of prisons and hospitals. Catechising, too was a major apostolate for members. Ten years later, after the end of the Jesuit presence in Waterford,⁴⁶ Edmund when taking his vows, chose Ignatius as his name in religion.⁴⁷

So it may well be at this time that the layman Edmund Rice continued his practice of inviting children into his home, this time at Arundel Lane, in order to teach them the basics of religion as part responsibility expected from a member of the Sodality of Our Lady.

Likewise, about this time he personally cared for the orphaned Connolly sisters:

I had two great grand aunts named Connolly. Their parent died when very young. I am unable to say which of the parents was first to die. When the surviving partner felt that

⁴² L. Scupoli, *The Spiritual Combat* (New York: Catholic Book, 1948), preface.

⁴³ O’Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:87.

⁴⁴ A. Gittins, *Reading the Clouds: Mission Spirituality for new times* (Sydney: St Pauls, 1999), xix.

⁴⁵ McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 129-30.

⁴⁶ “Bishop (Hussey) dismissed them from Waterford in 1798.” (See Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 29).

⁴⁷ Cause for the Canonisation of the Servant of God, Edmund Ignatius Rice, 1762-1844 (*Positio super virtutibus*) (Rome, 1988), 16.

death was inevitable he or she went to Edmund Rice, then a prosperous business man in Waterford and asked him to act as guardian to the orphans. The parents also gave to Mr. Rice some money for the upbringing and education of the girls. Mr. Rice agreed to act as guardian to the Connolly's. He lodged the money given him on their behalf in a bank, which after a short time became involved in financial difficulties and "failed" and the money for the orphan girls was thus lost. But Mr. Rice made good the loss himself from his own private funds and had the Connelly girls reared and educated at his own expense.⁴⁸

In 1794, when Waterford was experiencing famine, Rice, anticipating the establishment of the St Vincent de Paul society by some forty years, co-founded the Waterford branch of the Distressed Room-Keepers Society. The charity aimed to assist the poor, who "lived alone, forgotten even by their neighbours, in dire poverty but unwilling to seek from the public any assistance for the amelioration of their lonely and wretched condition."⁴⁹

Likewise, it was about this time that Rice visited prisons,⁵⁰ initially to comfort those who were incarcerated for their inability to pay debts as well as where possible even to pay their debts.⁵¹ These prisons administered far more than punishment, since they were seen to ultimately become "seminaries of depravity":⁵²

The debtor is soon converted into an active enemy of society; the young delinquent into a harden criminal...the minds of the inmates are rapidly moulded into one case-depravity of the most practised malignity; and whilst in many prisons religious instructions are either wholly withheld or irregularly supplied, the most effective teachers of depravity, evil example and evil communication, are in uninterrupted action.⁵³

A few years later,⁵⁴ Rice liberated and befriended the African slave boy, "Black Johnnie."⁵⁵ It will be argued later that "liberation" was to become a characteristic of his unique educational enterprise. Johnnie's legal name later became John Thomas. Two Presentation nuns relate the story:

The story is that he (Johnnie) came to the Port of Waterford on a trading vessel, and for some reason or other the Captain wanted to be rid of him or the boy wanted to be left ashore. At any rate the Captain agreed to hand him over to Edmund Rice. Presumably, a ransom was paid. The testimony says Edmund "negotiated with the Captain" for him. As a young lad, Johnnie became a messenger boy for the nuns. In adult life, with Edmund's help he prospered in business and became a property owner. In his will he bequeathed⁵⁶ to the nuns (and Brothers) two houses.⁵⁷

These episodes in Rice's life indicate that he had undergone gradually a developmental *kenosis*, and accompanying it, a heightened appreciation of and a unique sensitivity to the

⁴⁸ Nicholas Whittle, 2nd July, 1949, cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 328.

⁴⁹ Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 32.

⁵⁰ Cornelius Dempsey, 28th November, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 79.

⁵¹ See *Positio*, 209 for an extract from the account book of Most Rev John Power illustrating Rice's payments to those in debtors' prison.

⁵² *Positio*, 10.

⁵³ First Report of the Association for Improvement of Prisons (Holiday Pamphlets, RIA, 1995, no.1), 8-9.

⁵⁴ The slave trade was abolished in British colonies and ships in 1806. Johnnie was sent to the Presentation Nuns for night classes. Edmund's own school was not established until 1802. The Nuns started in Waterford in 1798.

⁵⁵ This story comes from Presentation Sisters Joseph Meagher and Philomena Bergin, 18 March 1913; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 267-68.

⁵⁶ Johnnie died on 15th February, 1848

⁵⁷ A. O'Neill, "Nuns and Monks at Hensessy's Road," in P. Carroll (ed.), *A Man Raised Up* (Dublin, 1996), 83.

reality of the Incarnation, which Christ is imaged in every human, especially in the poorest and most distorted and camouflaged of humans.

I recollect the following picture of Edmund Rice as a businessman. He was a meditative figure of somewhat serious bearing as he strode along the streets of the city. He was generally alone. The common sight in those days of the ragged and poor boys playing around the streets touched him and his heart went out to them.⁵⁸

Evidence of this transformative experience is recorded in the second extant of Rice's letters: "...were we to know the merit and value of only going from one street to another to serve a neighbour for the love of God, we should prize it more than Gold or Silver."⁵⁹

VOCATION

In 1792 Rice's younger brother, John, encouraged by Edmund, had already joined the Augustinian Order. This move was also influential upon Rice since it appears initially that Rice wanted likewise to travel to Rome "to seek the lowest place in an order of which his brother was a distinguished member."⁶⁰ Having decided that the continuance in a mercantile career was not to be his and that the pursuit of religious life was to what Rice felt God was calling him, the question to ask is: why didn't he pursue this supposed call to contemplation?

A Mount Sion tradition offers the following suggestion:

Mr. Rice made his intention of becoming a religious to a pious matron, whose advice he use to take on all important matters. She, evidently inspired by the Holy Spirit, asked him if it would not be better to do something for Waterford similar to what Nano Nagle had first done for the poor girls of Cork. The suggestion sank deep into the heart of Mr. Rice who abandoned the idea of going to Rome and resolved to devote himself and all his worldly goods to the poor neglected boys of Waterford.⁶¹

Traditionally, historians⁶² offer two related reasons, which motivated Rice to initiate his education mission:

While initially the desolate merchant considered the classic flight from the world, the chronic poverty of Waterford city convinced him that it was there, that he belonged, rather than the secluded cloisters of Melleray.⁶³ Central to the realization of this was the example of two near contemporaries, Bishop Thomas Hussey of Waterford and Lismore and Nano Nagle, foundress of the Presentation Sisters.⁶⁴

Rice's most influential charitable initiative, "an undertaking with which he was most closely identified,"⁶⁵ was the establishment of the Presentation Convent in Waterford for the education of poor girls in 1798. The Sisters' own words amplify Rice's contribution:

⁵⁸ Teresa Deevy, 4th July, 1949, recalling information provided to her family by a contemporary of Rice; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 76.

⁵⁹ Rice to Bolger, 10th August, 1810; cited in Normoyle, *Companion to a Tree is Planted*, 7.

⁶⁰ Fr. Richard Fitzgerald, Edmund's confessor for seventeen years, at the Month's Mind sermon; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 103.

⁶¹ Br. R. Hughes; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 147.

⁶² Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 36 -37.

⁶³ One of the many women Rice supposedly consulted was the sister of Rev John Power, who is reported to have said: "Would it not Mr. Rice," she added, "be far more meritorious work and far more exalted to devote your life and your wealth to devote your life to these neglected children in the principles of religion, and in secular knowledge, than to bury yourself in some continental religious house..." (McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 70).

⁶⁴ Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844*, 35.

⁶⁵ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:96.

Brother Rice assisted the nuns in every possible way...he assisted the Convent by giving the nuns financial help...he directed (the two Cahill sisters) to join the Presentation Convent, Waterford...the nuns have a lovely table which was presented by Brother Rice... it showed his appreciation...it indicated the generosity of Brother Rice...The lives of the Presentation Nuns must have been very suggestive to Brother Rice to further Christian and secular education, particularly with regard to the poor.⁶⁶

Certainly Fr. Fitzgerald, Rice's long-term confessor believed the Presentation nuns had a pivotal motivational influence Rice's educational mission:

Some years before the foundation of the Christian schools, the labours of the Ladies of the Presentation Order were felt and appreciated. ...it was their noble example, and the success that crowned their exertions, that stimulated the man whose memory we this day honour, to share in their meritorious labours. In this city he witnessed the blessings, which poor females derived from the truly Christian education they imparted.⁶⁷

However, a closer scrutiny of the evidence challenges this conclusion. This will be pursued later in the paper.

The second supposed influence on Edmund Rice was the 1797 pastoral letter⁶⁸ issued by the new Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Dr Thomas Hussey. Hussey was the former chaplain to the Spanish Ambassador in London since 1769, and was a familiar figure at the Court of St James. Indeed, "he played a unique role for a Catholic cleric in British political and social circles."⁶⁹ In 1792, he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society. Ironically, for a man so well connected, he possessed a brogue of "native broadness and vulgarity...strange that someone of the most ancient strain of Ireland and in foreign courts all his life should smack so strongly of the bogtrotter."⁷⁰ He became the first President in 1795 of St. Patrick's, Maynooth, an ecclesiastical College partially sponsored by the British Government, as well as the first Military Chaplain for Irish Catholic soldiers in the British army.

Thomas Hussey was made Bishop of Waterford in 1797. He had earned a reputation of hostility to religious orders and one of his first tasks as Bishop of Waterford was to dismiss the former Jesuits Fathers⁷¹ from pastoral duties at the "Little Chapel" of St. Patrick's⁷² in 1798. By this time Hussey had exiled himself to the continent because of the repercussion of his Pastoral Letter. He returned to Waterford December, 1802 vigorously reasserting his authority by suspending one of his clergy and leveling his church.⁷³ Hussey, unlike his predecessor appeared energetically provocative.

While this information amplifies insights into Hussey's character, the focus of the discussion is Hussey's Pastoral. In 1797, the Bishop was concerned about proselytizing Protestants, who established schools primarily for the conversion of poor Catholic children, rather than the provision of a substantial education and condemned the parents

⁶⁶ Presentation Sisters Joseph Meagher and Philomena Bergin, 30th April, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 262-267.

⁶⁷ Text of the Month's Mind Mass in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 105-106.

⁶⁸ See J.D. Fitzpatrick, *Edmund Rice* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1945), 85-95, for a Catholic interpretation of the Pastoral.

⁶⁹ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:101

⁷⁰ D. Keogh, "Thomas Hussey, Bishop of Waterford and Lismore 1797 - 1803, and the Rebellion of 1798," in W. Nolan & T. Power (eds.), *Waterford: History and Society* (Dublin: Geography, 1992), 404.

⁷¹ The Jesuits were suppressed as a Religious order in 1773. These former Jesuits continued their ministry at the Little Chapel as Diocesan Clergy until Hussey dismissed them.

⁷² Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 29.

⁷³ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:137.

who would “be so criminal as to expose his offspring to those places of education where his religious faith or morals are likely to be perverted.”⁷⁴

Some historians argue that Hussey’s Pastoral “provided the impetus he (Rice) needed to confirm his vocation,”⁷⁵ which was to combat proselytism using the Presentation Nuns’ educational apostolate as a blueprint for his own enterprise.

Rice aimed at the education of poor boys in the context of frustrating the efforts of Protestant proselytizing societies, which were working with renewed vigor during the years coinciding with the early development of the Christian Brothers.⁷⁶

Indeed, this interpretation was echoed by Archbishop Connell, at an address he gave to the Pope at Rice’s 1996 beatification Mass: “Inspired by the Pastoral Letter of Bishop Hussey on Catholic Education and Nano Nagle and the Sisters of the Presentation, Edmund wound up his business and opened his first school in a stable at Waterford in 1802.”⁷⁷ However, a closer scrutiny of the evidence, may entertain an alternative perspective, that negates the veracity of this common interpretation concerning Rice’s motivations. This will be pursued later in the paper.

The Presentation Influence

The neglected⁷⁸ history⁷⁹ of the Christian Brothers entitled *Origin*,⁸⁰ tends to challenge the basis of a catalytic Presentation influence on the foundation of Rice’s brotherhood. The author of *Origin* is very probably Br. Austin Dunphy, who was Assistant to Superior General Rice from 1822-9. It appears that *Origin* was written in Waterford during this time, so that “the Founder and his Council would have been available to supply material and check the accuracy of the account.”⁸¹ Using the *Origin* narrative, O’Hanlon⁸² makes a number of pertinent observations:

Our society was conceived in the mind of Edmund Rice in 1793, four years after the tragic death of his wife, and five years before the arrival of the first Presentation nuns

⁷⁴ Keogh, “Thomas Hussey,” 412.

⁷⁵ Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844*, 40.

⁷⁶ B. Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland: The Christian Brothers and the Development of Irish Nationalism 1838-1921* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 16.

⁷⁷ F. R. Hickey, “A Shining Example: The Cause and Beatification of Blessed Edmund Rice, 1911-1996,” *Christian Brothers’ History of the Institute*, Roman Series, no.2 (Rome, 1997), 76.

⁷⁸ “Like (Br. David) Fitzpatrick again, (Br Columba) Normoyle gives no indication of having consulted *Origin* regarding the history of the first twenty five years.” (W. A. O’Hanlon, “The Early Brothers of the Society of the Presentation,” *Christian Brothers’ Educational Record* [Rome, 1979], 165)

⁷⁹ *Origin* was clearly available to those who filled out the questionnaire of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland): Answers to queries to the Christian Brothers by the Royal Commissioners to Inquire into the state of Primary Education in Ireland (Powis Commission). The Brothers’ response to the Commission’s second question concerning the beginnings of the Institute parallels *Origin*. It provides information not contained in Father Fitzgerald’s lengthy *Month’s Mind* of 1844 or the *Biographical Register* of 1845 or the Chapter on Ireland in Riordan’s *Ven. J. B. De La Salle* (1843) or Shelly’s (1863) *Edmund Ignatius Rice and the Christian Brothers: A compilation*

⁸⁰ The first history of the Christian Brothers is entitled “*Origin*,” the author of which is very probably Br. Austin Dunphy, who was Assistant to Superior General Rice from 1822-9. It appears that “*Origin*” was written in Waterford during this time, so that “the Founder and his Council would have been available to supply material and check the accuracy of the account” (F. R. Hickey, “The First History of the Congregation,” *Christian Brothers’ Educational Record* (Rome, 1982), 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² O’Hanlon, “The Early Brothers,” 22-23.

in Waterford. This is clear from “Origin,”⁸³ which...was written ...probably at the dictation and under the supervision, of the Founder. The opening paragraph of “Origin” is:

In the year one thousand seven hundred and ninety three, Mr. Edmund Rice of the city of Waterford, formed the desire of erecting an Establishment for the gratuitous education of poor boys. In the following year he communicated his intention to the Right Revd. Doctor James Lanigan, Roman Catholic Bishop of Ossory, who strongly recommended to him to carry this intention into effect and assured him, that in his opinion, it proceeded from God. From that day forward Mr. Rice did not lose sight of the object he had in view; through various causes he did not commence the building until the year 1802.⁸⁴

The second last sentence above reflects a practice of Rice that many of his contemporaries identified as characteristic of him throughout his life: “Many stories were told of his trust in the efficiency of prayer. It was said that he never took any step of importance until assured of Divine guidance, but that when once resolved upon a course of action, he could not be turned aside from his object.”⁸⁵

The ultimate source of the opening paragraph of *Origin* is Rice’s recollection. He specifically mentioned the year 1793 and Dr Lanigan’s opinion as catalytic in the foundation of his Brotherhood. Consequently, they are worthy of some scrutiny. An initial question to ponder concerns the date 1793. Was this date merely a statement of fact or did something occur around that time that might have influenced Rice in making his choice for pioneering a teaching lay brotherhood?

It was in 1793, that a seemingly minor incident occurred, which appeared to have a significant impact on the thirty-one year old Edmund Rice:

This is Edmund’s own account of the circumstances, which led him to devote his life to the service of God. It is given as he told it to the Presentation Nuns at Waterford. In the incident he seemed himself to have recognized the finger of God. He was one day traveling with a holy Friar who was evidently a man of prayer. Both slept in the same room. Brother Rice’s companion on the occasion, employed so much of his time, not as it occurred to Br Rice in asking God for favours, but in ejaculatory prayer and in blessing God, that the future founder of the Christian Brothers asked himself why he was not devout to God as the Friar seemed to be. He resolved to give himself more to prayer, and to lead a monk’s life of retirement and contemplation...⁸⁶

O’Neill⁸⁷ speculates whether this friar was Fr Lawrence Callanan ofm, Nano Nagle’s confessor, who completed his draft rule and constitutions of the Presentation Sisters in 1793. If it was, Rice may have had another, more direct source of knowledge concerning governance of a lay teaching brotherhood. From a political perspective, 1793 must have been influential on Rice. 1793 was the year of Hobart’s Relief Act, which was the culmination of a number of acts of Parliament which affected Catholic education. Towards

⁸³ Hickey, “The First History,” 5-30; for the authorship and value of the content see O’Hanlon, “The Early Brothers,” 16-18, 158. For an illuminative critical overview of the various early biographies of Edmund Rice see O’Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:264–268 and O’Hanlon, “The Early Brothers,” 158 – 166.

⁸⁴ O’Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:81-84 succinctly provides the evidence that mitigated against Rice’s immediate establishment of a teaching congregation. I would offer another important reason. He enjoyed the company of his daughter and as a responsible and loving father was not prepared to start his enterprise until she was old enough. Mary was in her early teens, when Rice commenced in earnest his religious endeavour. Moreover, at his time it was common for girls from 15 to 17 years to marry.

⁸⁵ John Wyse Power, 7th June, 1913; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 245.

⁸⁶ Sisters Joseph Meagher and Philomena Bergin, 18th March, 1913; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 267-68. Sr Joseph’s aunt was Mother Patrick Keeshan, a ward of Edmund Rice. Mother Patrick told Sr Joseph this story.

⁸⁷ O’Neill, “Nuns and Monks,” 87.

the end of the American War of Independence,⁸⁸ Gardiner's Act⁸⁹ (1782) authorized Catholics to teach, only however if they had first obtained a licence from the Anglican Bishop. But the law, not unexpectedly, had a catch.

School masters can teach in future with impunity on taking the oath of allegiance and obtaining a licence from the respective Protestant Bishop, but these forms will be attended with some expenses which many poor teachers will be unable to pay.⁹⁰

In reality, licences were sought for schools not individuals and the ubiquitous hedge schoolmasters ignored the law and carried on business as usual. These teachers were in the main in an informal alliance with the Catholic clergy assisting them in the religious education of children of those who could afford to pay.⁹¹ Moreover, the intent of the law was primarily concerned with the education of the rich and upper middle classes and not the poor, forbidding explicitly the endowment of schools or the erection of a "popish" university. Ironically, "(t)he act inaugurated an era of church and school building."⁹²

Some ten years later, in 1791, Parliament passed an Act forbidding anyone "to found, endow or establish any religious order or society of persons bound by monastic or religious vows,"⁹³ but this in reality was an extension of existing laws which had long been in disuse, such as a clause in Gardiner's Act (1782) forbidding the entry of future members into established religious orders. Interestingly, many in the Irish episcopacy preferred their own diocesan clergy over regulars, even though there was a marked shortage of clergy at the time.⁹⁴ In 1792, Parliament enacted Langrishe's Relief Act which among other things removed the legal obligation on Catholic teachers to be licensed by a Protestant bishop.⁹⁵

However there is considerable evidence to conclude that licences were sought and obtained after 1792. In effect though a licence was not needed legally for Catholics to teach, the authorisation from the Anglican Bishop was still de facto required: "By law, a licence to teach was no longer required; in effect, the permission of the ordinary of the diocese was essential."⁹⁶ The Presentation Nuns obtained their licence on the 16th December 1799,⁹⁷ so that "through the efforts of Edmund Rice...in the last weeks of 1799, the Sisters occupied their new convent and school."⁹⁸ The final clause in the licence highlights why it was necessary for Rice also to likewise obtain such authorisation: "And we do by these present inhibit all other person or persons from teaching within the said city, without our licence or faculty..."⁹⁹ Rice himself is said to have "applied for a licence to

⁸⁸ It is likely that the British Parliament's motivation was to deter Catholic volunteering to the American cause. For details see M. Wall, *Catholic Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Geography, 1989), 90.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

⁹⁰ W. Carrigan, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory*, vol.1 (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1905), 263.

⁹¹ A. McManus, *The Irish Hedge School and its Books 1695-1831* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004), 24; P. Dowling, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* (Cork: Mercier, 1968), 42; S. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001), 97.

⁹² M. Wall, *Catholic Ireland*, 145-6.

⁹³ 31st George III c.32 cited in Fitzpatrick, *Edmund Rice*, 112.

⁹⁴ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 57.

⁹⁵ P.J. Dowling, *A History of Irish Education: A Study of Conflicting Loyalties* (Cork: Mercier, 1971), 81.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 84-85.

⁹⁷ Henry Keane; cited in O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:120.

⁹⁸ T. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin: Gill, 1959), 154.

⁹⁹ For the text of the licence see Fitzpatrick, *Edmund Rice*, 115-116.

teach; this was refused him. He got it eventually through the good offices of a friend¹⁰⁰ of his¹⁰¹ before he had commenced teaching in New Street, “a residential area for the Protestant gentry.”¹⁰² Be that as it may, throughout the country there was increased grudging toleration by the Government towards Catholic education of the poor: “In 1792 Bishop MacMahon of Killaloe described to his Roman agent the generous subscription made by the grand jury of Co. Clare towards a school which he had set up in Ennis citing this as an example of ‘what liberal sentiments subsist betwixt Roman Catholic and Protestants’.”¹⁰³ This being the case, it is not surprising that a year later at the opening of the first bridge over the river Suir at Waterford, the memorial inscription read: “In 1793, a year rendered sacred to National Prosperity by the extinction of Religious Divisions the Foundation of this Bridge was laid.”¹⁰⁴

It was in 1793 that Hobart’s Relief Act was promulgated. It conceded “the parliamentary franchise to all forty-shilling freeholders, a socially not religiously restricted right to hold firearms, a general right to apply for civic and corporate membership, and the end of the bar to jury membership.”¹⁰⁵ The Act seemed to have made a great impression upon the people at the time. Indeed, Bishop Troy penned a pastoral letter in a style that today appears to be bordering on hyperbole:

Our gracious king, the common father of all his people, has with peculiar energy recommended his faithful Roman Catholic subjects of this kingdom to the wisdom and liberality of our enlightened parliament. How can we, dear Christians, express our heartfelt acknowledgements for this signal and unprecedented instance of royal benevolence and condescension? Words are insufficient.¹⁰⁶

One should be aware that the excesses of French revolution were having a strong influence on Irish politics, and Troy deliberately chose to clothe the English monarch, who was no friend of Catholics, in emancipatory language. The argument being that Irish Catholics should be considered as loyal subjects; and as such all the rights of other subjects of the king should be extended to them. To penalize Catholics played into the hands of republican revolutionaries.

In this context, ordinary lay Catholics, like Rice seemed to believe the time was now right for Catholics to do something about the education of the poor on a more organized way. “The 1793 act placed Catholics on the same level as Protestants in all matters concerning education.”¹⁰⁷ Consequently, in Cork: “(t)he enhanced civic liberties of the Relief Act of 1793 prompted the city merchants to organize a network of schools for poor children, particular for boys. So was born in 1793 the Cork Charitable Committee...”¹⁰⁸ It interesting that such an initiative was lay led at this time, and it was not until the 1820s with disillusionment with the Kildare Place Society¹⁰⁹ that Episcopal leadership became interested in establishing a “Catholic education” beyond ensuring Hedge School

¹⁰⁰ This friend was probably Mr Peter St Ledger, a merchant, whose name appears on the Presentation licence as referee.

¹⁰¹ Frederick Swift, 25th June, 1949; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 305.

¹⁰² Seamus Upton, 24th June, 1949; cited in *ibid*, 309.

¹⁰³ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in O’Neill, “Nuns and Monks,” 80.

¹⁰⁵ D. Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800* (Dublin: Irish Academic, 2000), 197-8.

¹⁰⁶ Troy, 25th January, 1793; cited in Connolly, *Priests and People*, 210.

¹⁰⁷ J. Kent, “The Educational Ideas of Edmund Rice, Founder of the Presentation and Christian Brothers” (master’s thesis, University College, Cork, 1988), 55.

¹⁰⁸ Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 188.

¹⁰⁹ Dowling, *A History of Irish Education*, 110-114.

masters,¹¹⁰ parish priests and curates taught the catechism.¹¹¹ It does seem likely that the Waterford merchant Edmund Rice, would have been aware of the initiative of his Cork counterparts. So it was in 1793, that Rice's personal faith journey coincided with a politically fortunate time that permitted the remnants of dying penal laws to be judiciously flouted by people of diplomacy, vision and credibility.

Origin continues the story by narrating that Rice specifically named Bishop Lanigan as confidante in 1793 of his incipient education vision. Lanigan was bishop of Rice's native diocese, Ossory, and had established a reputation for himself as an educationalist:

As a young man, Lanigan had held the post of usher in a Protestant school at Carrick-on-Suir owned by the Rev Mr Jackson, and before that had been a pupil, thereby contravening the law in both capacities; but no action appears to have been taken against either him or the Rev Mr Jackson.¹¹²

He later studied at the University of Nantes in France and was ultimately appointed a Professor of Mathematics there. He likewise undertook his sacerdotal studies there.¹¹³ Lanigan pioneered in September, 1793, ecclesiastical education by commencing a philosophy class with students from all over Ireland, laying the foundations of the future St Kieran's College, a secondary school and a seminary for the domestic and foreign missions.¹¹⁴

It was at Nantes that the La Salle Brothers had a large school.¹¹⁵ Consequently, Lanigan would have had first hand experience of the potential for good that a lay teaching brotherhood could generate.¹¹⁶ In his consultations with Rice, Lanigan would have shared with Rice his knowledge of the French Brotherhood. The La Salle Brothers had over one thousand members in over a hundred communities, mainly in France, until 1792 when they were disbanded and outlawed by the French Revolution. They were a large Order and had already substantially influenced Western education.¹¹⁷ They certainly would have interested an educationist like Lanigan. Indeed, Lanigan had in 1784 co-founded the Kilkenny Charitable Society, a group of volunteers devoted to charitable works throughout his diocese.¹¹⁸ Some members of this society, colloquially called "monks" lived a loosely-structured form of common life. Later in the nineteenth century, Lanigan planned to use these men as the nucleus in establishing in his own diocese a group of teaching "Monks" like Rice's, but this was aborted by his successor, Dr Marum.¹¹⁹ The de La Salle Brothers were not reconstituted until 1803, when Napoleon officially recognized the Church's legality in France. This was a year after Rice started the beginnings of his own Christian brotherhood. "At the very time when the long established French brotherhood had ceased to exist, the layman Edmund Rice now proposed to found in Ireland a religious community

¹¹⁰ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 97-99.

¹¹¹ Dowling, *A History of Irish Education*, 110-115.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 140-141.

¹¹³ Fearghus Ó Fearghail, "The Catholic Church in county Kilkenny 1600-1800," in W. Nolan & K. Whelan (eds.), *Kilkenny: History and Society* (Dublin: Geography, 1990), 248.

¹¹⁴ Dowling, *A History of Irish Education*, 141.

¹¹⁵ Kent, "Educational Ideas of Edmund Rice," 225.

¹¹⁶ This observation contradicts the *Positio*, 18: "The one paradigm for him – the De La Salle Brothers – had been abolished by the French Revolution and he knew nothing of them."

¹¹⁷ A. Calcutt, *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle, 1993).

¹¹⁸ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:79.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

with similar aims in most unpromising circumstances.”¹²⁰ Given such unwelcoming omens, Edmund Rice wrote unofficially to Pope Pius VI¹²¹ in 1796 seeking assurance about his proposal to establish a community of teaching lay brothers in Waterford. The Pope “encouraged Mr. Rice to proceed with it.”¹²²

Fortuitously for Rice, Lanigan was one of seven Bishops, with whom Bishop Moylan of Cork consulted in early 1793, in his revision at Rome’s request, of the Presentation Sisters’ Constitutions.¹²³ It is likely that Rice left Lanigan, not only with knowledge that a lay teaching brotherhood was indeed possible, but also with some understanding of how such a brotherhood could be organized with an adaptation of the already approved Presentation Rule. It seems probable that Rice had an appreciation of the governance structures of Presentation Sisters long before he had met any one of them. At this stage, the influence of the Presentation Sisters on Rice was more an organizational dynamic than an inspirational one.

It was after that Rice met Lanigan that he with his personal friend, Fr. John Power¹²⁴ commenced long term planning for the establishment of a Presentation Convent in Waterford. There were no Sisters available to send to Waterford but Waterford girls would be accepted for training to establish a convent there later. Consequently, Fr Power’s sister, Ellen entered the Cork novitiate in April, 1795.¹²⁵ Perhaps Rice’s enthusiasm in helping the establishment of a school and convent for the Presentation Sisters had a personal dynamic. Could Rice, the astute businessman use this stage of the Presentation Sisters development as a trialing process for his own plans for a brotherhood and school? Consequently, it is clear from the Origin narrative that Rice became aware of Nagle’s work in Cork, only after he had conceived his own plan and had conveyed it to Dr Lanigan. *Origin* offers no evidence that he had met any Presentation Sisters, or visited their schools. Since Rice’s initial planning with Dr Power to establish a Presentation Convent in Waterford occurred after his meeting with Dr Lanigan, it is difficult to assert that Nano Nagle’s initiative was a blueprint for Rice to duplicate a similar activity for the education of poor males. It is more likely that his limited knowledge of Nagle’s activities reinforced Rice to pursue his incipient education vision, a proposition supported by Nagle’s official biographer:

For some years Mr. Edmund Rice, a young man of business, contemplated the inroads of ignorance on youth and pondered the ways and means of supplying the defects. He had long felt that God called him to the work; the incentive grew stronger with the proposed establishment (in Waterford) of the Presentation Sisters.¹²⁶

Origin concurs with this interpretation. Immediately, after detailing Edmund Rice’s call, the writer of *Origin* pens a timeline which makes very clear that it was five years after

¹²⁰ Ibid, 80.

¹²¹ Statement of Br. Bernard Dunphy before the Commissioners of Primary Education Inquiry, 1825; cited in Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 39.

¹²² O’Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:274-5.

¹²³ M.P. O’Farrell, *Nano Nagle: Woman of the Gospel* (Cork: Cork Publishing, 1996), 215.

¹²⁴ “Doctor Power was educated at the University of Louvain, where he distinguished himself by his piety and talents and subsequently by his ability in the Chair of Philosophy. The French Revolution soon made soon made Belgium unsafe ground for ecclesiastics, and Dr Power had to return to his native diocese of Waterford, thus terminating his brilliant academic career. His appointment was to a curacy; but his extraordinary exertions in the cause of religion...soon attracted the attention of his good bishop, Dr Hussey, who promoted him to the Parish of St John’s...On the death of Dr Hussey, the eyes of all, bishops priests and people were turned on him as the most worthy to succeed.” (Hickey, *History of the Institute*, 1:29).

¹²⁵ O’Farrell, *Nano Nagle*, 274.

¹²⁶ Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 152.

Rice's original desire of erecting an Establishment for the gratuitous education of poor boys that Rice actually saw the results of the Sisters' educational apostolate (1798):

About this time he had an opportunity of seeing the good effects of the Moral and Religious Education of the poor, in the conduct of the female children, who were instructed by Presentation Nuns, who established themselves in this city in the year one thousand seven hundred and ninety eight.¹²⁷

Rice himself makes this point, though more subtly. In 1826 he writes an autobiographic summary of his mission's genesis, in a letter to the La Salle Superior General.

The poor of this country want education very badly. Among the many cruel penal laws, which were enacted against the Catholics of Ireland since the Reformation, there was one, which forbade any Catholic to teach school or even to be a tutor in a private house, under pain of transportation for life! His being detected in the act of teaching anyone, subjected him to this terrible punishment without even the formality of a trial.¹²⁸

It is not yet forty years since this cruel law was repealed; it was in force for an entire century, and you will judge, it must have great power in demoralizing the people.¹²⁹

Two elderly Presentation Sisters with direct connections to Rice confirm Rice's analysis of the situation,¹³⁰ and deliberately refrain from laying "great stress on the influence of their community had on Edmund Rice. They are much more aware, it is clear, of the great kindness shown by him in so many practical ways."¹³¹

Brother Rice seemed raised up by God at the beginning of the nineteenth century to shape Catholic education for this and many other countries....During his early life he must have seen the disabilities under which Catholics laboured for want of Catholic education.¹³²

Any reference to the Presentation influence on Rice's vision comes much later in the Sisters' evidence, when a number of episodes catalytic to clarifying his vocation had been related. Only then, almost as an after-thought do they insert: "The devoted lives of the Presentation Nuns must also been very suggestive to Brother Rice to further Christian and secular education, particular in regard to the poor."¹³³

Clearly, Fr. Fitzgerald was mistaken to conclude that "it was their (Presentation Nuns') noble example, and the success that crowned their exertions, that stimulated the man whose memory we this day honour, to share in their meritorious labours."

By way of conclusion, it is more accurate to assert that Nano Nagle's educational work confirmed Rice's own unique vision, rather than "inspired Edmund Rice to do for boys what Nano had begun for them in Cork."¹³⁴

...this gift of the founding charism was received by Edmund Rice as a personal inspiration before he had knowledge of, or any contact with Nano Nagle's Presentation Sisters or the De La Salle Brothers.¹³⁵

¹²⁷ Hickey, *History of the Institute*, 1:7.

¹²⁸ C. Maxwell, *Town and Country in Ireland under the Georges* (London: Dundalgen, 1949), 118-130.

¹²⁹ Normoyle, *Companion to A Tree is Planted*, 159.

¹³⁰ Sisters Joseph Meagher and Philomena Bergin, 30th April, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 267.

¹³¹ O'Neill, "Nuns and Monks," 87.

¹³² Sisters Joseph Meagher and Philomena Bergin, 30th April, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 266.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 267

¹³⁴ O'Farrell, *Nano Nagle*, 273.

¹³⁵ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:312.

Given this background, it is not at all convincing that Rice joined an established spiritual movement that was both middleclass and feminine, or that in any way the Christian Brothers could legitimately be described as "male nuns." The feminine influence in Rice's brotherhood through his mother, wife and daughter is clearly evident and influential, as is Rice's leadership role an example of middle class initiative, but the thesis mounted by Magray in *The Transforming Power of Nuns*¹³⁶ cannot be convincingly applied to Rice and his founding of his Christian Brotherhood. It is agreed that there are parallels in the founding the female orders and the Christian Brothers. Though they shared the same political, economical, cultural and social contexts, there are substantial differences in that Rice conceived his brotherhood, developed its government, and pioneered a "different" school system with a pragmatic, flexible curriculum. The evidence is unconvincing that places Rice along a theoretical continuum with Nagle, Mulally, Aikenhead, McAuley, Ball and Aylward. Rice generated his education vision independently of any substantial Nagle influence. Indeed, a case can be made that some of the female founders adopted aspects of Rice's educational vision.¹³⁷ Rice pioneered a form of religious life, foreign to his contemporary Ireland, aiming to promote much more than a docile Catholicism to be used politically by a combative episcopacy, though there is evidence that this occurred when other generals governed the Brotherhood.¹³⁸

At its foundation, Rice's own individual life story and personal catharsis was more influential in the genesis of the Christian Brothers than other persons, be they bishops, priests, Protestants, politicians, nuns or the supposed plethora of advising women.¹³⁹ This is not to deny contextual issues pervading Ireland and influencing Rice at the time, but to honour the special pioneering initiative of Rice, which in ever so many ways was genuinely unique, rather than representative of a pervading established feminine pattern. What characterized the early Christian Brothers was a robust masculinity, honed into a compassionate fatherly and family-like dynamic which is inadequately captured by the concept of "male nuns."

Bishop Hussey and his Pastoral Letter

The other supposed influence on Rice was Bishop Hussey and his 1797 Pastoral Letter denouncing Protestant proselytizing. "The bishop's pastoral had a profound impression on Rice who had been contemplating joining the Augustinian Order, of which his brother John was a member, Edmund, however abandoned these ideas and devoted himself to the cause of Catholic education."¹⁴⁰ The most common belief concerning both Rice and Hussey is typified in the following description: "The natural kinship between the minds and

¹³⁶ Magray, *Transforming Power of Nuns*, 127-130.

¹³⁷ Hickey, *History of the Institute*, 1:161-162.

¹³⁸ Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, 33ff.

¹³⁹ There are ten separate sources, which describe Rice consulting a woman about his future vocation. These include "a Waterford lady" (Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 266); "Pious matron" (Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 147; O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:268) thinks this person is Mrs. St Ledger. However, two other traditions specifically name the women. One is Joan Murphy Edmund's half-sister (Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 187-188) and Fr John Power's sister (McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 70). Mary Whittle says it was a nun (in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 327). What is consistent about the story is that (i) Edmund discussed his vocation with a woman and (ii) her answer was to provide for the poor boys of Waterford rather than to join a contemplative order. Consequently, Br ÓCaithnia believes that the essence of the story to be true. L.P. Ó Caithnia, "The Man from Callan," in P.S. Carroll (ed.), *A Man Raised Up: Recollections and Reflections on Venerable Edmund Rice* (Dublin, 1996).

¹⁴⁰ Keogh, "Thomas Hussey," 417.

characters of these two men helped considerably in bringing to fruition the divinely inspired purpose of Edmund Rice."¹⁴¹

However, all was not as it appeared. Unbeknown to Rice, Hussey had been in written communication with Fr. Luke Concanen O.P., Prior of San Clemente, Rome, and the Irish Bishops' Roman agent, who had sent to Hussey two letters¹⁴² communicating Vatican policy on education. In his December 1802 letter, he unashamedly sensitized Hussey to the personal prestige with which he would be credited, if Rice's school was permitted to be established.

Dr Moylan (Bishop of Cork) had acquired immense merit by the pious institute of the Sisters of the Presentation of the BVM. I applaud in the extremes your notion of doing the like on behalf of poor male children. Pray do mention this in your relatio (report to Rome).¹⁴³

Just after this letter, Hussey turned frosty towards Rice and his school ministry, when he actually appreciated the substantial nature and style of the £2,000 Mount Sion buildings. Hussey clearly realised that these were not the type of poor schools he had established in his diocese before his exile.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, this enterprise was conceived, implemented and financed by a lay man during Hussey's exile from his diocese. Indeed, Rice's school had become a fiat accompli, without Hussey's knowledge or authorisation. Possibly, Hussey did not want the predominately lay led and lay sponsored and relatively autonomous organization in Waterford like the Cork Charitable Committee, founded in 1793 for the education of poor boys. The matter became resolved when Rice's bone fides were established by his surrender of the title deeds of Mount Sion through a Deed of Assignment to Hussey and an offer to pay rent to the Diocese for the very property Rice owned.¹⁴⁵ The Congregation historian notes that the tension was resolved but Hussey ensured that the Deed was registered on the 25th April, with both his and Rice's signatures.¹⁴⁶

Not hearing that Hussey had accepted Rice's initiative, Concanen once again, this time in May 1803, pressured Hussey to establish a "sodality of men, devoted to the instruction of boys and doing the same for them as the nuns were doing for the girls, (which) would be most pleasing to the Holy See."¹⁴⁷ In addition, Concanen urged Hussey to consult Dr. James Lanigan, Bishop of Ossory, who was pioneering Catholic education in his diocese in a more systematic way. The irony of this advice was that Rice had already consulted Lanigan nine years before and it was he who counseled Rice that his ideas of a future teaching brotherhood were divinely inspired.

This evidence challenges that a supposed cozy relationship existed between Rice and Hussey.¹⁴⁸ There is no record that Rice ever met Hussey during his first term of two months as Bishop. It is implied that they did in his second Waterford sojourn. But this period was a relatively short one of six months before his death. "...we have it from our

¹⁴¹ Fitzpatrick, *Edmund Rice*, 85.

¹⁴² These letters were found in the Bishop of Waterford's residence in 1961, by Br Berchmans Cullen.

¹⁴³ L. Concanen to Hussey, 15th January, 1803; cited in M.C. Normoyle, *The Roman Correspondence: Treating of the Early Years of the Institute of Edmund Rice 1803-1844* (Dublin: Christian Brothers, 1978), 1. The reference cited in *Positio*, 45 says the letter was dated 26th January, 1803.

¹⁴⁴ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 96.

¹⁴⁵ Hickey, *History of the Institute*, 1:13

¹⁴⁶ *Positio*, 50.

¹⁴⁷ Concanen to Hussey, 4th May, 1803; cited in Normoyle, *The Roman Correspondence*, 1.

¹⁴⁸ McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 87.

Founder's biographer that before 1803, Mr Rice was totally unknown to most Rev Dr Hussey."¹⁴⁹ *Origin* is careful to indicate that it was only after "the building (Mt Sion) was commenced" that Hussey, "highly approved of Mr Rice's intention." This is written after a lengthy paragraph detailing Rice's purchase of a school site for the "gratuitous Education of poor boys" and the formation of his initial community. *Origin* does not mention Hussey's Pastoral, nor any Protestant proselytizing activities. If these were so influential in triggering Rice to action the question to ask is: why did not Rice ensure their inclusion in the Congregation's first history? Rice's sense of justice was exceptionally rigid¹⁵⁰ and as the ghost writer of *Origin*, he would have ensured the accuracy of the Hussey contribution would have been recorded for posterity. The author of *Origin* is diligently factual in recording Hussey's connection with Rice and wants to ensure that Hussey in fact eventually supported Rice's initiative, as if to squash any lingering rumours to the contrary. *Origin* unambiguously reports that it was Rice who initiated the notion of a lay teaching brotherhood, not Hussey's Pastoral. Moreover, this matter of fact reportage concerning Hussey in *Origin* is to be contrasted with the esteem and affection generated in describing Bishop Power, "This zealous and pious bishop was a warm and sincere friend of the Institute..." Likewise, Archbishop Murray is described as the Brothers' "sincere friend" who took the Brotherhood's "interests warmly to heart."

Far from being an enthusiastic supporter of Rice's mission, it seems that Hussey was initially cautious ensuring that any such initiative would be directly under his episcopal supervision. By keeping Rice in limbo for some time, Hussey could ensure this lay initiative was corralled and contained by him and that any credit for it would be his. Indeed, he was able to report to Rome on the 29th June how

...some few men have been formed into a Society under the authority of the bishop who eagerly desire to bind themselves by the three solemn vows of chastity, poverty and obedience under rules similar to those of the sisters, and already a convent residence has been built where four holy men¹⁵¹ reside who seek approbation of their rules whenever it will be deemed advisable by the Holy See.¹⁵²

The wording of this letter implies that Hussey was the catalyst for the Society and provider of the residence. Unlike, his successor Dr Power who, when writing to Rome specifically mentioned Rice's name: "Mr Edmund Rice... is himself one of the pious workers."¹⁵³ Hussey is silent about Rice. Consequently, Hussey's initial support for Rice may not have been entirely pastoral for a careerist prelate, who had an established reputation of hostility against Religious Orders.

However, by June 1803, a rapprochement had been established with Rice, for Hussey blessed and named Rice's school, "Mount Sion." Moreover, on the 10th July, Hussey wrote his Last Will and Testament, which indicated how Rice's authenticity and integrity had won over this prickly ecclesiastic:

...each master shall be paid by my executors, twenty pounds for each Master per annum. The masters to be five in number, Mr Rice to be included as one of the Masters, his salary to be for life, as he is proprietor for life of the Buildings...¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ A.I. Keenan, "Further Notes on the Life of the Founder," *Our Studies* 37.1 (1964), 69.

¹⁵⁰ Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 337.

¹⁵¹ Edmund Rice, Thomas Grosvenor, Patrick Finn, and John Mulcahy.

¹⁵² Translation of the Latin text in *Positio*, 51; another translation is in Normoyle, *The Roman Correspondence*, 2-3.

¹⁵³ Bishop John Power to Pope Pius VII, u.d. but late 1808; cited in Normoyle, *The Roman Correspondence*, 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Positio*, 52

Ironically, Hussey died of heart attack the next day, while on holiday.

There may well be good reasons why *Origin* does not mention Hussey's Pastoral. The supposed influence of this letter on Rice's initiative invites careful examination, since prior to the 1820's, the relations between the Churches were relatively friendly:

The radical diversions of the two peoples, which marked Irish society after the 1820s, had not been found in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. During that period, to a remarkable degree, the Catholic majority and the minority Protestant ascendancy seemed to be able to tolerate each other.¹⁵⁵

Indeed, just one year before the Bishop's Pastoral, Waterford's Protestant freemen unsuccessfully petitioned the King for complete Catholic emancipation.¹⁵⁶ This was the year, Hussey's predecessor Bishop Egan died. He belonged to the last generation of penal bishops. He has been criticized as being ultra-cautious, with "a gentleness and amiability trenched on timidity."¹⁵⁷ However, his diplomatic inclusivity and urbanity helped nurture a new respectability for the Catholic hierarchy as is illustrated by Cork's Bishop Moylan's reflections on Egan's funeral:

Nothing could surpass the respect paid by all denominations of people to the memory of our dear and much to-be-regretted deceased friend. The funeral procession was attended by the principal Protestant gentlemen of the county, with the mayor and corporation of Clonmel... Most of the lawyers then on circuit attended, and the judge declared that if he could with propriety, quit the bench he would attend the funeral of so venerable member of society.¹⁵⁸

Such a relatively cordial atmosphere caused John Law, the Anglican Bishop of Elphin to comment: "I know I cannot make them good Protestants, I therefore wish to make good Catholics of them."¹⁵⁹ As a consequence,

...the majority people responded to Protestant overtures to religious peace, and there seemed to be a strong desire on the part of the Roman Catholic clergy of Ireland, countenanced by the see of Rome, to conciliate the minds of their Protestant fellow-subjects and to remove objections against their own principles and conduct.¹⁶⁰

Private non-denominational schools peacefully co-existed where Catholic and Protestant teachers together amicably instructed children of both religions.¹⁶¹ It was the Methodists and some small evangelical sects that actively proselytized during this time.¹⁶² However, the Catholic Church considered them minor irritants.¹⁶³ The Anglican's Association for Discountenancing Vice and Promoting Knowledge and Practice of the Christian Religion was at this time (1792-1805) having a negligible influence on Catholic children. It was during the "early 1820s ... (that) the society became increasingly repugnant to Catholic feelings."¹⁶⁴ Moreover, the most aggressive of the Protestant proselytizing agencies, the

¹⁵⁵ D. Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-1870: a study of Protestant - Catholic relations the Act of Union and Disestablishment* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), x.

¹⁵⁶ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile* 1:326.

¹⁵⁷ Annalist quoted by O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:100.

¹⁵⁸ Bishop Moylan to Bishop Bray, 28 July 1796; cited by Connolly, *Priests and People*, 38.

¹⁵⁹ Bowen, *Protestant Crusade*, 84.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Dowling, *A History of Irish Education*, 77-78.

¹⁶² Bowen, *Protestant Crusade*, 34.

¹⁶³ Kent, "Educational Ideas of Edmund Rice," 43.

¹⁶⁴ D. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970), 81.

London Hibernian Society was founded in 1806.¹⁶⁵ Consequently, the influence of the few proselytizing organizations at this time was relatively limited.

However, it is Sullivan's research, which identifies clearly the object of Rice's educational mission. He has provided an analysis of schools and their participation by religious persuasion and concludes that in Waterford, in 1800, there could not have been much more than 350 Catholic children being educated in schools,¹⁶⁶ irrespective of the school's denomination. Indeed, it was the four to five thousand Catholic children running wild in the streets,¹⁶⁷ which were the focus of Rice's educational mission, not the comparatively few Catholic children attending Protestant schools:

It was the sight of poor boys along the quays of Waterford, which inspired Edmund Rice to commence his system of education. These poor boys didn't know anything about schools. The chances that any proselytizing society would entice such a fringe group to their schools was practically non-existent. Consequently, further emphasis on the activities of various proselytizing societies as a crucial factor in Rice's decision to set up his own system of education is out of place.¹⁶⁸

Clearly, Protestant "sheep stealing" at this time was nothing like the issue Rice's biographers appear to have made it. Indeed, Hussey's Pastoral "was considered extremely injudicious by his Episcopal colleagues: The threat of excommunicating and naming people from the altar was considered by rational people of the time to belong to an era long past."¹⁶⁹

Hussey's Pastoral was almost universally condemned.¹⁷⁰ Conservative Protestants saw it as further evidence of Irish disloyalty to the Crown; Protestant and Catholic moderates believed that Hussey's advocacy of educational segregation was a catalyst to the erection "of a spiritual wall to replace the civil barriers which were being dismantled."¹⁷¹ Many good people of both faiths generally empathized with the perspective that "the worst enemies of Ireland could not devise a scheme more effectually calculated to keep this description of the king's subjects a distinct people forever, and to maintain eternal enmity and hatred between them and the Protestant body."¹⁷² The then Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Troy criticized the Pastoral as "calculated to irritate, to open and not to close the wounds of party."¹⁷³ Ironically, Waterford's poor, who Hussey assumed he was protecting, believed his inflammatory sentiments "might jeopardize their chances of employment in Protestant households and businesses."¹⁷⁴ Hussey was to write, probably in 1799, that he regretted publishing the Pastoral in the tone he adopted, and considered it as a "foolish milk and water letter."¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 82.

¹⁶⁶ Reports of the Commissioners of Ireland: Education Inquiry, 1791; cited in Fitzpatrick, *Edmund Rice*, 95-96.

¹⁶⁷ J. Sullivan, "The Education of Irish Catholics 1782 - 1831" (PhD diss., Queens University, Belfast, 1959), 214.

¹⁶⁸ J.P.L. Walsh, "A Comparative Analysis of the Reading Books of the Commissioners of National Education and of the Christian Brothers 1831-1900" (master's thesis, University College, Dublin, 1983), 20-21.

¹⁶⁹ Kent, "Educational Ideas of Edmund Rice," 43-44.

¹⁷⁰ Keogh, "Thomas Hussey," 412-416.

¹⁷¹ Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844*, 40.

¹⁷² Dr Thomas O'Beirne, Anglican Bishop of Ossory, 27th April, 1799; cited in Keogh, "Thomas Hussey," 413.

¹⁷³ Troy to Carroll, 17th April, 1798; cited in D. Keogh, "Thomas Hussey," 413-414.

¹⁷⁴ Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844*, 40.

¹⁷⁵ Hussey to J.B. Clinch, Professor of Rhetoric at Maynooth 10th January; cited in Keogh, "Thomas Hussey," 418.

Consequently, after only two months residency in his diocese Hussey, under threat of litigation, exiled himself to the Continent for the next five years. He returned to stay in December 1802 and then only for a few months for he died in July of 1803. In stark contrast to Bishop's Egan's dignified funeral, Hussey's was characterized by ignominy:

The remains were brought to Waterford for burial, and during the funeral procession were seized by a group of drunken soldiers, returning from an Orange meeting, who tried to throw the coffin into the River Suir. A riot ensued and the local militia recovered the remains and escorted the funeral to the Great Chapel.¹⁷⁶

Such an event stands once again in contrast, this time to Hussey's successor, Dr Power upon whom, "extraordinary honour was paid to his memory. His funeral procession comprised practically every citizen of Waterford, including the Protestant Bishop and clergy."¹⁷⁷

It was around the mid 1820's that active sectarianism became clearly aggressive. "Beginning abruptly in 1822 with a declaration of war by a Protestant prelate (William McGee of Dublin), it initiated a period of religious controversy which represented the passing of the age of 'accommodation'."¹⁷⁸ Connolly¹⁷⁹ has attributed this phenomenon to three factors:

- i. the Second Reformation movement;
- ii. a more combative, narrow outlook of the Catholic Church; and
- iii. a new style of popular politics.

The Second Reformation was an energetic Protestant missionary movement dedicated to the conversion of Irish Catholics.¹⁸⁰ These Protestants established schools specifically to proselytize,¹⁸¹ and thus in the words of a Catholic bishop were "the cause of diminishing considerably the mutual harmony and friendship between Catholics and Protestants that had subsisted till the unfortunate period of their existence."¹⁸² It was at this time, that the Christian Brothers were invited to combat the inroads of militant Protestantism,¹⁸³ albeit moderately.¹⁸⁴ O'Toole's description of the situation seems overly exaggerated.¹⁸⁵

Thus while the noisy debate of the 'Battle of the Bibles' resounded from pulpit and public platform, Edmund Rice and his brothers in the quiet obscurity of their poor schools were fighting the real battle for the spiritual birthright of the rising generation.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁶ *The Morning Register*, 18th January, 1825; cited by Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 49.

¹⁷⁷ P. Power, *Parochial History of Waterford and Lismore* (Waterford, 1912), 36.

¹⁷⁸ Bowen, *Protestant Crusade*, xi.

¹⁷⁹ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 25-30.

¹⁸⁰ Keogh, *Edmund Rice, 1762-1844*, 80-81.

¹⁸¹ Bowen, *Protestant Crusade*, xiii.

¹⁸² Bishop O'Shaughnessy; cited by Keogh, "Thomas Hussey," 63.

¹⁸³ Kelleher, "Edmund Rice: A Timely Restorer of Faith and Hope in Ireland," in P.S. Carroll (ed.), *A Man Raised Up*, 96-114.

¹⁸⁴ The evidence is that with the possible exception of Ennis (see Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 204; also Normoyle, *Companion to A Tree is Planted*, 136, 164-165) no Brothers' school was established at this time to combat proselytism. The Parish Priest does not mention Protestant proselytizing in his first request for Brothers (136). Later, he writes to Edmund that even before the Brothers have arrived the Protestant endeavours have been foiled. "The Biblicals are alarmed and fast at work but all to no purpose." The question to ask is: Was this a ploy to gain Brothers in the parish?

¹⁸⁵ P. de Brun, "The Irish Societies Bible Teachers, 1818-1827," *Éigse* 20 (1984): 34-92.

¹⁸⁶ O'Toole, *Spiritual Profile*, 1:188

Certainly, this description is not an accurate one for the Congregation's genesis. Indeed, the Congregation's first historian described Rice as one who had good relationships with men of all faiths:

He was unquestionably a very remarkable man. The first time I saw him was in 1796. ...He had a high character among the Catholic people and mercantile classes of the county. Indeed, he was respected and trusted by all creeds and classes.¹⁸⁷

Such mutual respect and indeed support continued after the founding of Mount Sion:

Br. Rice had the good will of not only Catholics but of people of every religious persuasion. When Br Rice made a collection for his good work Protestants as well as Catholics subscribed, as the charitable work in which he was engaged appealed to all.¹⁸⁸

Sir John Newport,¹⁸⁹ an Anglican, Member of Parliament and personal friend of Edmund Rice for nearly forty years extended his patronage to Rice to ensure possible opposition to Rice's mission was neutralized.¹⁹⁰

Indeed, it was Waterford's Quakers who were conspicuous for contributing to the provision of food and clothing for Rice's poor students.¹⁹¹ Moreover, in early 1808 representatives of Waterford Protestants passed a resolution to abolish discriminatory laws against Catholics. "It is our earnest wish that these unhappy divisions and lines of demarcation be obliterated forever." Such resolutions were replicated in Kilkenny, Clare, Limerick and Tipperary.¹⁹² This was not a period of widespread Protestant proselytizing of Catholic children.

The supposed Bishop Hussey Pastoral influence on Rice, has more to do with historical projection from the times of the Second Reformation movement and triumphal Catholicism onto the Congregation's birth, than fact. Rice's motivation was far more complex involving personal, spiritual, cultural, social and educational dynamics than a response to extreme Protestant evangelism. Indeed, the evidence concludes that, "Rice and the Brothers belonged to the moderate camp of Catholicism and had, perhaps more in common with Protestant liberals than with Catholic extremists."¹⁹³ This is typically illustrated in a letter written by the author of *Origin* (Austin Dunphy) to Br Patrick Corbett. Both were close personal friends of Rice.¹⁹⁴

He (Mr. Edgeworth) is, of course, a Protestant, but a liberal Protestant, and is doing all he can to promote the education of the poor of this country.... He and I were on the best of terms.¹⁹⁵

The evidence is that Rice (in his own words) "laboured for the advancement of Education amongst the poorer classes"¹⁹⁶ as an authentic purpose in itself and not as an antidote for proselytizing Protestants.

¹⁸⁷ Br Austin Dunphy; cited in McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 67.

¹⁸⁸ James Mooney, 24 August 1912, cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 195.

¹⁸⁹ There is a beautiful letter Rice (5 July 1830) wrote to this Protestant Gentleman. "I could wish with all my heart that I had it in my power to render you any little service for the many acts of kindness, which I have received at your hands myself"; cited in Normoyle, *Companion to A Tree is Planted*, 347.

¹⁹⁰ Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 70.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 64.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁹³ Kent, "Educational Ideas of Edmund Rice," 116.

¹⁹⁴ See a particularly very human dynamic between Corbett and Rice in Normoyle, *A Tree is Planted*, 258.

¹⁹⁵ McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 216 -217, spends some pages eulogizing this liberal Protestant.

¹⁹⁶ Rice's will is in Normoyle, *Companion to A Tree is Planted*, 520.

Protestants held the Christian Brothers in great veneration and they subscribed liberally to their schools and the Protestant gentry were no exception in showing their respect.¹⁹⁷

The conclusion to make is that there is scant evidence to assert that Hussey's Pastoral was a motivating factor that galvanized Edmund Rice into action at the time he moved to establish his first school.¹⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the argument underpinning this paper challenges the accepted interpretation that Rice initiated his brotherhood to fight Protestant proselytizing at the instigation of Bishop Hussey, by providing an education for poor boys as the Presentation Nuns were doing for poor girls. There is no evidence for these scenarios in the Christian Brothers' first history *Origins*, a history supervised by Rice himself.

It is more likely that Rice's choice to completely reorientate his life, and dedicate his extensive wealth to become "the first layman of the English-speaking world to found a body of apostolic religious dedicated exclusively to the apostolate of Christian education"¹⁹⁹ was generated from a far more personal source. The trauma experienced through the death of his wife and the loss of their uniquely deep love were the catalysts to catapult Rice along a psychological journey of painful self-discovery. This experience and the constant intimacy associated with his choice to be an active father to his daughter, Mary nurtured within Rice's psyche a sensitized appreciation of what it meant to be human. Fatherhood extracted from Rice a unique compassion for poor children, who had become dehumanized by systemic neglect and government perpetrated ignorance. Rice gradually appreciated the key implication of the reality of the Incarnation, that the greatest presence of the risen Lord are humans, especially the most distorted. Rice's foundational motivation for his Christian Brothers was ultimately generated from a deep compassion²⁰⁰ for the "dear little one's"²⁰¹ in which he saw his incarnational Lord, than any desire to combat relatively insignificant Protestant proselytizing. Rice did not respond to any Episcopal or institutional church initiative. The Congregation of Christian Brothers was conceived from Rice's compassion for "the children, especially the poorest, as most resembling Our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁰² "...compassion for the poor and the afflicted was one of the precious heirlooms our beloved Founder left to his children..."²⁰³

Author: Denis McLaughlin is an Associate Professor in the School of Educational Leadership, Australian Catholic University. He currently is completing a book on the educational philosophy of Blessed Edmund Rice.

Email: d.mclaughlin@mcauley.acu.edu.au

¹⁹⁷ James Forrest, 20th September, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 116-117.

¹⁹⁸ Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, 12.

¹⁹⁹ *Positio*, 111.

²⁰⁰ Br Virgilius Jones, 7th May, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 151.

²⁰¹ Rules and Constitutions of the Society of Religious Brothers (Dublin, 1832), 2.13.

²⁰² McCarthy, *Edmund Ignatius Rice*, 163.

²⁰³ Br Virgilius Jones, 7th May, 1912; cited in Normoyle, *Memories of Edmund Rice*, 151.