

Irish Nuns in Nantes 1650-1659.

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References by various authors to a small group of Franciscan Nuns of the Third Order Regular who fled from Ireland to Brittany at the end of 1649 or very early in 1650 have been based on hitherto scant sources, principally Travers' history of Nantes (1841)¹. The location of their convent of origin in Ireland remains to be ascertained. The following details are drawn from Travers and have been cited by the authors in question: the date of arrival of the nuns in the Loire estuary is 'some six or seven months' previous to the report drawn up for the municipal authorities in Nantes on 17th July 1650; they were eight in number, and were assisted by an Irish orphan girl, Catherine Roche, who had arrived in Nantes *circa* 1646 and served as their interpreter², their confessor, an Irish Franciscan priest whose identity remains to be ascertained, and a maidservant (presumably local). They lived a cloistered life in La Bignolière house in Richebourg, a suburb of the city. According to the municipal enquiry, they had requested permission from the bishop of Nantes to have mass said in the house in order to observe their intention to remain enclosed, and this permission would appear to have been granted³. Travers stated that the nuns left Nantes thereafter and returned to Ireland; this speculation is not based on any evidence but may be inspired by the decrees banishing poor Irish from Nantes in 1605 which Travers noted elsewhere, leading him to assume a similar pattern of events. Millett however remarks that it was unlikely that they returned across the sea given the context in Ireland, and that 'Presumably they remained in or around Nantes for at least the duration of the persecution'⁴. Vatican documents quoted and later calendared by Millett suggest that such was the case: Bonaventure Mellaghlin was 'commissary visitor of houses of Irish friars and nuns in France' in March 1658; the house of friars being that of Paris,

¹B. Millett, *The Irish Franciscans 1650-1665*, Rome, 1964, pp. 235-36; C. Mooney, *Irish Franciscans in France*, Dublin, 1964, pp 105-06 'Nuns and Sisters'; both drew on N. Travers, *Histoire civile, politique et religieuse de la ville et du comté de Nantes*, 3 vols, Nantes, 1836-41, vol III, p. 341, as did A. Walsh, 'Irish Exiles in Brittany', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Fourth Series, Vol 1, (1897), pp. 318-20, and J. Mathorez, 'Notes sur les prêtres irlandais réfugiés à Nantes aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', *Revue d'Histoire de l'Eglise de France*, Vol 13, (avril 1912), p. 166.

²No further trace of Catherine Roche has yet been found in Nantes or at Le Croisic.

³Irish readers can consult the French text as printed in Walsh, 'Irish Exiles in Brittany', loc. cit., pp. 318-19.

⁴Millett, op. cit., p. 236.

founded the previous year, and the nuns being most likely the Poor Clares at Dieppe and, as will become clear below, their fellow-countrywomen at Nantes⁵.

Material from various Nantes registers supports Millett's analysis and details the identity of some of the nuns and the order to which they belonged. The work of the Groupe de Travail Jacobites on Irish occurrences in Nantes parish registers, *Les Irlandais dans les registres paroissiaux de Nantes 1601-1793*, mentions three Irish nuns who died between 1651 and 1659, and further research by a member of the group revealed the presence of one more Irish nun of another order in Nantes⁶. The municipal report states that the Mother Superior, Marie-Baptiste, speaking through her 14-year-old interpreter Catherine Roche, stated that they were of the order of St Elizabeth, and that they had left Ireland having been persecuted by the Parliamentary forces. Six months later, on the 21st of January 1651, the Mother Superior died; the death notice identifies her as 'Marie-Baptiste Purcell of the Third Order of St Francis, native of Ireland, superior of nuns who left Ireland with her because of the wars'. She may therefore have been a relative or family member of Sister Elizabeth Purcell of Kilkenny, also of the Third Order (mentioned by Millett p. 237). A similar variation in the name of the order is found in Bishop Nicholas French's report on his diocese of Ferns in 1653, where, as Millett notes, he calls the Tertiary Sisters of Wexford and New Ross 'nuns of St Elizabeth'⁷. There is a high degree of likelihood that the Nantes group had come from the South-East, perhaps from convents in Wexford, New Ross or Kilkenny⁸. The Cromwellian advance had forced the Poor Clares to leave Wexford in January 1650, a date which would tally with the arrival of the Third Order group in the Loire estuary⁹. It is quite possible that they were from a house in the diocese of Ferns, and that they crossed over to France with their bishop, Nicholas French, who resided in Nantes before undertaking his well-known travels on the continent.

The burial entry confirms the strictness of the nuns' observance and its monitoring by the ecclesiastical authorities, as it states that the nuns lived in Richebourg until flooding forced them to leave and take lodgings in the house of one Maître Hardouin. This building was adjacent to the Oratorian house and on the road to the Visitation convent, as noted by the parish register. The insertion of these details,

⁵Millett, 'Calendar of Volume 14 of the Fondo di Vienna in Propaganda Archives, part 3, ff 284-395', *Collectanea Hibernica*, vol 31-32, (1989-90), p. 151. The letter from Mellaghlin to Maurice Conry is at pp. 300r-301v of vol 14. See also *The Irish Franciscans 1650-1665*, p. 232.

⁶M. Kerney-Walsh, A. Loncle de Forville, M. Sandra, *Les Irlandais dans les registres paroissiaux de Nantes 1601-1793*, Rambouillet, 1996, 3 vols; Betome entry at Vol 2, pp. 100-02, Breth at Vol 2, pp. 103-05, Purcell at Vol 3 pp. 295-97. Also A. Loncle de Forville's list 'Relevé des décès et abjurations des Irlandais à l'Hôtel-Dieu de Nantes entre 1604 et 1789', unpublished, copy in author's possession.

⁷*Archivium Hibernicum*, V, (1916), p. 119; Millett, *The Irish Franciscans*, p. 235. The full title of the order is the Hospital Sisters of St Elizabeth of the Third Order of St Francis; it was founded at Aachen in 1622.

⁸convents of the order existed in these towns, Millett, *op.cit.*, p. 234

⁹*ibid.*, p. 226.

which make the entry double the usual length, indicate the attention paid by the authorities to the Irish nuns' observance, expressed also by the fact that they are located in relation to other religious residences. Walsh (1897) finds the nuns' decision to live a cloistered life laudable and beyond what 'even a very rigid theology' would require of them given the grave circumstances of the time¹⁰, but the municipal enquiry indicates that they were taken in hand by the local church. This is consistent with the attitude of Bishop Gabriel de Beauvau of Nantes towards the Irish clergy generally at this time. The exiled clergy were free to exercise their religion in France, far more so than in Ireland, and thus the nuns' decision to live a cloistered life is not so surprising and can be interpreted as adhering to the order's ideals and Counter-Reformation directives for religious, in a context where such was feasible (unlike Ireland at the time). The notices for the sisters who died in 1659 may indicate straitened circumstances, as one of them was buried 'gratis' by the parish priest, although the second was honoured with a procession and two priests (see below).

De Beauvau was bishop of Nantes from 1635 to 1667, and as has been noted in various articles, he welcomed bishops Patrick Comerford of Waterford and Robert Barry of Cork in his diocese as auxiliaries¹¹. Comerford died in 1652 and was buried with pomp and ceremony in Nantes; Barry ministered in Nantes from 1652 until his death in 1662. (Others too supported the exiled clergy: Vincent de Paul sent sums of money to Bishop Barry at Nantes on three occasions between 1655 and 1657¹²). The city in fact became a refuge for the Irish Catholic clergy for the duration of the English Commonwealth; Nantes had the advantage that bishops and clergy residing there could remain in contact with their dioceses by means of messages carried by shipping. Only in Paris were numbers greater during the 1650s: a report sent to Cardinal Mazarin in 1653 mentions that the Bishop of Cork (Barry) had arrived in Nantes with 13 priests and that the bishop of Ardagh (Patrick Plunkett) was there with 55 priests¹³. In the same year the Vincentian Fr. Edmund Barry wrote in a letter: 'I am informed there is the matter of three score of those exiled priestes for the present at Nantes'¹⁴. The estimate was no doubt conservative. Numbers were to rise in 1655 with the arrival from Galway of the bishops of Tuam (John Burke) and Killala

¹⁰Irish Exiles in Brittany', p. 320.

¹¹See 'Irish Exiles in Brittany', John Lynch's *De Praesulibus Hiberniae*, ed. J. F. O'Doherty, Dublin, 1944, 2 vols, and P. Hurley, 'A Bishop of Cork and the Irish at Nantes', *Dublin Review*, 1892, pp. 38-51; also R. d'Ambrières, 'Les tribulations des ecclésiastiques irlandais exilés en Bretagne', in *Le Pays de Dinan*, vol XXI, (2001), pp. 165-189. An expanded English version of this article, which details the exile of nine bishops, is being prepared for publication.

¹²P. Coste, *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, Paris, 1920-25, 14 vols, see vol V, p. 414, vol VI, pp. 133, 152.

¹³Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, *Correspondance Politique Angleterre*, vol 61, p. 222, July 1653.

¹⁴Fr Edmund Barry to Fr Gerald Brin, July 1653, in B. Jennings, 'Miscellaneous Documents III', *Archivium Hibernicum*, XV (1950), p. 26.

(Francis Kirwan) with some thirty priests, all of whom had been jailed for 14 months¹⁵. The various Nantes parish registers (mainly St Nicolas) contain the names of various priests and students (of whom some were probably clerics) who died in Nantes during the 1650s. A small number stayed on after the Stuart Restoration, notably clergy from Cork and Cloyne whose traces are to be found in parish registers.

The Irish nuns were clearly part of this large group of exiles who looked to Bishop Gabriel de Beauvau for 'sûreté et protection', in the words of the epitaph for Bishop Comerford¹⁶. In the case of Mother Marie-Baptiste Purcell, links must also have existed with the local male Franciscan order, as she was buried in the Franciscan church ('of the Cordeliers'). That these women religious remained in Richebourg (presumably after a period in Maître Hardouin's house) is clear from the burial entries for two members in 1659. In September of that year Sister Marie Breth 'who lived with other Irish nuns at Richebourg' was buried in the church of the Minims at St Clément, and in November Izabel Betome/Betoue (*sic*) died and was buried in the same church. According to the municipal document used by Travers, the Irish nuns attended Mass in the church of the Minims from the time of their arrival. This connection could however support A. Walsh's views on the strictness of the rules observed by these nuns, as the Minims were known in seventeenth-century France as an observant order and for their leading role in the campaign against the libertines. The documentation currently at our disposal does not indicate who replaced Marie-Baptiste Purcell as Superior, if the position was filled; some traces may yet be found in Nantes diocesan archives which will throw more light on these religious questions.

Further evidence of their presence and of the support of local authorities for the nuns comes from the archives of the Chambre des Comptes of the Parliament of Brittany, which was then located in Nantes. Among the functions and powers of this chamber was determining the financial contribution to be paid by foreigners to whom the King of France granted letters of naturality. Part of this form of taxation was the payment of alms to religious orders and poorhouses. Recent research on letters of naturality has revealed that on three occasions, the Chambre des Comptes decreed that alms be given to the 'religieuses hibernoises' or 'religieuses irlandaises' living in the suburb of Richebourg¹⁷. Two payments were ordered in 1651 and a further payment in 1658, dates which coincide with the other mentions of the nuns in parish records and the visitation by the superior Mellaghlin. This chronology may denote important

¹⁵J. Lynch, *De Praesulibus*, II, p. 259, and J. Lynch, *Pii Antistitis Icon*, Saint Malo, 1669 and Dublin reprint, 1951, p. 201.

¹⁶quoted in extenso in 'Irish Exiles in Brittany', part III, p. 130.

¹⁷E. Raimbaud, *Les étrangers en Bretagne d'après les lettres de naturalité XVIème-1661*, mémoire de maîtrise, UFR d'Histoire, Université de Nantes, 2000, 2 volumes. See in particular vol 1 p. 73 and vol 2, annexes.

turning points for the group; the absence of any payment or other mention between 1651 and 1658 requires further analysis in the context of the general Irish presence in Nantes and the protection and support for the clergy in general during the 1650s.

The Irish nuns may also have benefited from their Franciscan connection, as the financial chamber strongly favoured the various local Franciscan orders (Cordeliers, Recollets, Capuchins, the Poor Clares..) according to the totals calculated by Raimbaud¹⁸. The sums donated to the Irish nuns were substantial enough and fall into the average of grants of alms to the poor or to other religious orders: twice twenty-five livres, and twelve livres on another occasion. All three cases involve Dutch subjects, of whom two were Protestant merchants, both naturalised in 1651. One cannot avoid suspecting that the international context and some degree of knowledge of the treatment then being meted out to the Catholics of Ireland by the English Parliamentary forces may have been a factor in the Chambre's decision to order Dutch Protestants to make payment to Irish Catholics¹⁹. The Breton Parliament thus made two orders for payment to the Irish nuns shortly after their arrival, and this must have helped them to settle and eased their situation considerably. This reflects the firm support given to Irish clerical exiles in Nantes and elsewhere in the province, as mentioned above.

No further mention is found in seventeenth-century parish registers of any Irish nuns of the Third Order or of the order of St Elizabeth after 1659. They may have moved elsewhere as did a large proportion of the broader Irish population of Nantes in the years 1659-61: Philip O'Sullivan Beare left Nantes in 1659, Sir Nicholas Plunkett did so in 1661, and a number of the merchants disappear from the parish registers at the same time, leaving behind a small but well-off group of their colleagues. According to Millett, no trace is found of the Third Order group in Ireland thereafter, making their return most unlikely. Given the mortality rate among exiles, other members of the original group of eight nuns may have died in the 1650s apart from the three whose death is documented, making the survival of the community after 1659 rather doubtful. The later mention of Sister Jeanne Shiel who died (aged fifty) in 1718 is too far removed in time to point to a continuous presence as there are no traces of Irish nuns in parish records between 1659 and that date²⁰.

¹⁸idem, vol 1 p. 73, table.

¹⁹Archives Départementales de Loire-Atlantique, B80, folios 11-12 and B292, lettres de naturalité for Jan Van Armeijden, Dutch merchant, a Protestant from Dordrecht, 1651; B 80, fol. 10-11 and B292, lettres de naturalité for Mathieu Gael, associate of Van Armeijden, also a Protestant, native of Delft, 1651; B81, fols. 164-66, lettres for Pierre Van Basserode, a Dutch Catholic, of Antwerp, 1657-58. Cited by Raimbaud, op. cit., vol 2, pp. 21, 61.

²⁰Mathorez, 'Notes sur les prêtres irlandais', and Mooney, *Irish Franciscans and France*, p. 106; parish records as per *Les Irlandais dans les registres paroissiaux de Nantes 1601-1793*.

An Irish member of another order of nuns was at Nantes in the 1650s however: the register of the Hôtel-Dieu notes the death of 'Sister Gillette Barry, a nun of the order of St Bernard, forty years of age and native of the diocese of Cork' who died in 1658 and was buried in the Dominican church ('of the Pères Jacobins')²¹. Her presence may be connected to the large number of Cork priests in exile at Nantes. Further research may tell whether she was related to Bishop Robert Barry or to the Vincentian Edmund Barry; it should be noted however that the name Barry is found in other parish registers throughout Brittany in the seventeenth century.

²¹A. Loncle de Forville, 'Relevé des décès et abjurations des Irlandais à l'Hôtel-Dieu de Nantes entre 1604 et 1789'. M. De Forville kindly supplied photocopies of the original documents for all four nuns mentioned in this article. Prof Alain Croix verified some readings and pointed to references in the Breton Parliamentary archives.

Transcript of the entries:

St Clément (Nantes) (*21st January 1651*)

Marie-Baptiste Pourcelle: Le samedi vingtunesme jour de Janvier l'an mil six cent cinquante un fut inhumé en l'Eglise des Cordeliers de Nantes le corps de humble Religieuse Marie Baptiste Pourcelle du tiers ordre de St François natifve d'Hibernie supérieure d'autres Religieuses sorties avec elle à cause des Guerres, demeurantes à Richebourg en la maison de la Bignolière delaquelle elles sortirent hier à cause de l'eau qui est dans la salle et sont venues demeurer, sept qu'elles sont au logis de M[âitr]e Hardouin situé joignant le logement des Prestres de l'Oratoire par endroit, et par autre le chemin pour aller au couvent de la Visitation.

Pierre Robinet.

Recteur

(*21st September 1659*)

Soeur Marie Breth: Le vingtunesme desd[its] fut inhumé en l'Eglise des Minimes mes paroissiens le corps de Marie Breth Religieuse demeurante avec autres venues d'Hibernie à Richebourg

devant Jacques Bouhier

Pierre Robinet gratis

Recteur

(*3rd November 1659*)

Izabel Betome* Religieuse: Lesdits jour et an que dessus fut inhumé aux Minimes le corps de Izabel Betome* Religieuse hybernoise demeurante avec autres à Richebourg et levé le corps assisté dudit Coüé et conduit pr[oc]essionnellement

Pierre Robinet Recteur

*Betome, Betone, Betoue, possible readings.

Hôtel-Dieu, Nantes:

(*1st October 1658*)

Octobre 1658:

Bary: Soeur Gillette Bary religieuse de l'ordre de St Bernard aagée de quarante ans natifve d'Hybernie en l'Evesché de Corcq est décédée dans cedict Hospital apres avoir este Munie des tres Saints Sacrements et a esté inhumée dans l'Eglise des réverends

Peres Jacobins de Cette Ville le mardy premier jour d'octobre an p[rése]nt soubs le
signe dudit aumosnier

Translation:

On Saturday twenty-first of January in the year 1651, burial took place in the church of the (Franciscan) Cordeliers, Nantes, of the body of humble sister Marie Baptiste Purcell of the Third Order of St Francis, a native of Ireland, mother superior of other nuns who left Ireland with her because of the wars, (and) who reside in Richebourg in the house of La Bignolière, which they left yesterday on account of the water in the main room, and came to stay, seven of them, in the house of Maître Hardouin which is located adjacent to the Oratorians' house on one side, on the other by the road to the convent of the Visitation. (signed) Pierre Robinet, parish priest.

On the twenty-first of the above (i.e. September 1659) the body of Marie Breth, a nun who lived with other nuns from Ireland at Richebourg, was buried in the church of the Minims, witness Jacques Bouhier, (signed) Pierre Robinet, parish priest, gratis.

On the day and year above (i.e. 3rd November 1659) the body of Izabel Betoue*, a nun who lived with other nuns from Ireland at Richebourg, was buried in the church of the Minims, and the body was removed with the assistance of the aforesaid (Fr) Coué and carried in a procession. (signed) Pierre Robinet, parish priest

possible readings: Betoue, Betome, Betone

Sister Gillette Bary of the Order of St Bernard, aged 40, a native of Ireland in the diocese of Cork(*sic*), died in this hospital having received the Holy Sacraments, and was buried in the church of the Dominican fathers in this city, on Tuesday the first of October in the present year* , signed by the above chaplain.