

History

An enclosed contemplative order, the Galway Poor Clares trace their presence in Ireland as far back as 1629 when a group of seven Irish sisters (originally professed at the English Poor Clare convent in Gravelines, Spanish Flanders), established a house at Merchant's Quay in Dublin city. Owing to increasingly harsh measures against Catholic practice in the capital during that period, the Dublin foundation proved short lived and within two years, the sisters relocated to a secluded rural location near Athlone, County Westmeath (in the midlands), where a convent named Bethlehem was constructed off the shores of Lough Rea.



The Bethlehem convent prospered for a number of years so that by the late 1630s the community had expanded to number about sixty members. Among those who joined the expanding community included a cohort of Galway women, many of them related to the socially influential 'tribes of Galway'. They included Catherine (d. 1669) and Mary (d. c.1694) Browne, daughters of Galway Alderman and merchant Andrew Browne, a well-known recusant. Mary Browne (in religion Sister Bonaventure) would later go on to pen a chronicle history of the Irish Poor Clares, the principal source of evidence for the activities of the order during this early phase. Other Galway natives included Catherine Browne (d. 1668), daughter of James Browne of Galway, the signed record of whose pre-profession examination at Bethlehem on 29 January 1632 still survives.

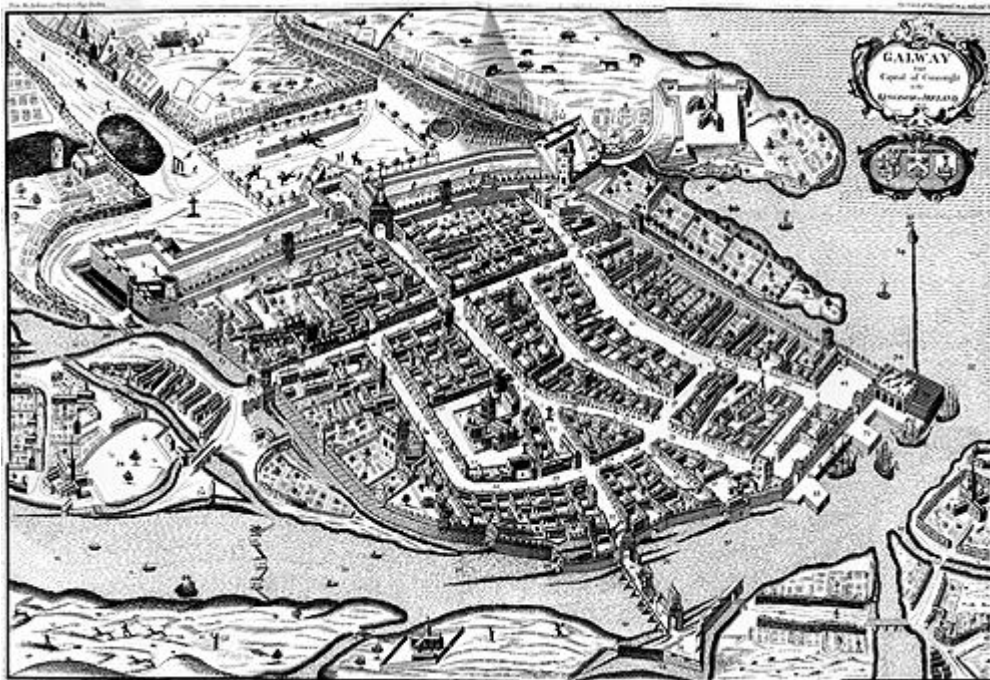
The outbreak of rebellion in Ireland in autumn 1641 seriously challenged the strength and resilience of the Bethlehem establishment and the community was forced to disband in June 1642. The sisters were dispersed and compelled to seek shelter with friends and relatives in various locations throughout Ireland; some travelled to Wexford and Waterford, in the south-east of the country, while others dispersed to Sligo in the west, and Longford and King's County (Offaly), in the midlands. In a letter dated 27 December 1642, presumably written by Cecily Dillon, then abbess of the Bethlehem convent, and addressed to an unidentified recipient, the author describes how the nuns were 'distressed poor creatures' who, on account of the 'dispersion and dissolution of ye kingdome ... scarce know upon whom to turne our face for ye price of a habitt'.

On 30 January 1643, 'in view of the disturbance of the time' permission was granted by the Franciscan Provincial, Fr Anthony Geoghegan, to the sisters to establish a new convent in Galway. The terms of the licence commanded that the sisters 'betake yourselves there [to

Galway] at the first opportunity, proceeding on the way gravely and religiously, to the edification of all those whom you meet'. Guided by the Abbess elect, Mary Gabriel Martin (d. 1672), the fledgling community consisted of no more than two novices and eleven professed sisters. The decision to relocate to Galway was doubtless prompted by the presence there of family members and benefactors who could support the nascent community.

Initially the community rented a small premise in the centre of the town. In mid-1649, Mary Browne, in her position as abbess, petitioned Galway Corporation for permission to build a new convent on a site just west of the town walls. In her petition, signed 'Mary Bonaventure, unworthy abbess', she outlined the hardships faced by the community, including the threat of imminent eviction:

... through necessity by reason of the tymes their parents and friends are unable to furnish their wants as in peacable tymes the have intended, and that your poore petitioners doe suffer much by the exorbitant rent they pay, and notwithstanding their due payment, are to be thrust out of their dwelling next May, their lease being ended.



On 10 July

1649 Galway Corporation granted the Poor Clares permission to build a convent with a garden and orchard attached on 'Islannaltenage', known today as 'Nuns' Island'. The sisters occupancy of the premises would prove short lived, however. Following a period of plague – which reached Galway in 1649 – and siege warfare, the town of Galway surrendered to Cromwellian forces in April 1652. The Poor Clares, like their religious brethren the Franciscans, and other communities of women religious in the town, including the recently established (1646) convent of Dominican nuns, were compelled to avail of the terms of surrender and depart for the Continent. Members of the Poor Clare community dispersed to Bilbao and Orduña, as well as the university towns of Salamanca, Valladolid, Madrid and Malaga. Among those who fled, included Mary Browne who penned her chronicle account of the order while living in exile in the convent of El Cavallero de Garcia in Madrid, where she later died in c.1694.

While some members of the community left Galway, others opted to remain (this was in direct contravention of the Cromwellian edict 'commanding all nuns, of whatsoever condition, to marry or quit the kingdom'). They included Mother Mary Gabriel Martin, who remained living

clandestinely in the town throughout the later decades of the seventeenth century, probably sheltered in the private residences of friends and family. By the early 1680s the community had been revived; in 1684 the abbess received permission from the Franciscan provincial to receive new novices into the community but with the stipulation that it be done 'privately, however, and without any great solemnity'. The outbreak of the Williamite Wars (1688–91) meant that the Poor Clares were once again obliged to disperse and many left Ireland. As in the 1650s, a small number remained living clandestinely in the town, although it was not always possible for them to live on Nuns' Island, the site originally acquired in 1649.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Galway community had once again been revived, occupying a premises in Market Street, in the town centre. In 1712 such was the strength and growing prosperity of the Galway house (which by then numbered more than forty members), a decision was taken to open a convent in Dublin. Led by six Galway sisters, among them Mary Augustine Lynch, an off-shoot convent was established in the capital, first at Channel Row, on the site of a former Benedictine convent, and later in North King Street, in the north of Dublin city. For an account of the Poor Clares in Dublin during the eighteenth century, you can listen to the podcast of Dr Bernadette Cunningham's paper, 'Gentlemen's Daughters in Dublin Cloisters: The Social World of Nuns in Early Eighteenth-Century Dublin'.



While the Dublin North King Street community was subsequently dissolved in 1834 (due to financial difficulties), the Galway house sustained. Today, the convent remains on the same Nuns' Island site originally granted to the community by Galway Corporation in 1649. The community's recent 375th anniversary was marked by the celebration of Mass (in the convent chapel), officiated by the Franciscan Provincial Fr Hugh Mc Kenna, OFM, and attended by members of the local Galway Franciscans. Although deeply connected to their history, in recent years the Galway Poor Clares have embraced modern technology as a means of expanding their outreach. Indeed the community has been particularly active on social media, holding their own dedicated Facebook page, Youtube channel and Soundcloud account, a testament to the on-going vibrancy and modern day relevance of this historic community.

Written by Dr Bronagh Ann McShane and first published on the website of RECIRC: The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550-1700