THE ENGLISH CONVENTS IN EXILE AND QUESTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY C. 1600–1688

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Introduction

The foundation of the Benedictine convent in Brussels by Mary Percy in 1598 ‘to receave the daughters of the gentry and nobility of England’ marked the beginning of a significant foundation movement in exile creating religious institutions specifically for English women.1 From the outset, the nuns demonstrated their awareness of the importance of the national identity of their institutions and their sense of a mission to preserve English Catholicism. By 1678, twenty-one enclosed English convents had been founded as well as the Mary Ward Institute, the Sisters of which lived unenclosed.2 In addition to the new foundations, the Bridgettines had stayed together after the dissolution of the monasteries finally settling in Lisbon in 1594. Although the foundations remained self consciously English over the next two hundred years, exceptionally they admitted women of other nationalities as members.3 A study of the origin of the members of the English convents in


2 Mary Ward was unable to gain official recognition of her institute by the Papacy: as a result definitions of the status of the organisation in the seventeenth century are complex. In spite of lack of official approval, women continued to join her and they lived a religious life as lay women while carrying out mainly educational work in the schools they established. They were called a variety of names by supporters and opponents, among them the English Ladies, Mary Ward Sisters, Jesuitesses, and Galloping Girls: see Mary Wright, Mary Ward’s Institute: the Struggle for Identity, (Sydney: 1997).

3 This paper draws on research over several years in many of the surviving conventual archives now in England. My thanks are due to the interest and kindness of the archivists and superiors who have allowed me to share the contents of their archives and libraries and given guidance along the way. Many historians of English women religious owe much to the scholarship and generosity of Sister Gregory Kirkus of the Bar Convent, York who died in September 2007. This chapter is dedicated to her memory. I am grateful to Dr Carmen Mangion for her perceptive comments on earlier drafts.
the seventeenth century shows that there were a few members from Ireland, Wales and Scotland at that time alongside the English names. Moreover, when the English Benedictine convent at Ypres was unable to attract sufficient English recruits after its foundation in 1665, the senior members agreed it should be handed over as an Irish house from 1682. This paper will explore the reasons why it was thought essential to establish separate English convents on the continent and consider questions of national identity arising out of this process.4

Questions relating to the identity of religious institutions in exile are complex and multi-facetted. Created initially through foundational texts arising out of the intentions of the founders, the identities of the convents were subject to competing influences which might modify those original identities. The religious identity of the convent decided by the founders governed the spirituality, for instance, whether Benedictine, Augustinian, Carmelite or Franciscan. Within the order, each convent established its own particular identity, seen in the constitutions drawn up for each house in English specifying in detail how the religious life was to be lived and the structure of convent governance.5 The English convents had to specify from the start the ethnic origin of their members if they were to fulfil their founders’ intended purpose of creating an English institution in exile as well as meeting the requirements of those local authorities granting permission. Insisting on English practices throughout the highly structured daily life of the convent could reinforce this. However, inevitably, at the same time, some external local influences, such as languages and building styles, were assimilated into conventual culture. Outside the convent walls, senior members of the convents operated in what often became complex interlocking networks of contacts which crossed national and local boundaries, while continuing to maintain and emphasise their English identities and leading exemplary religious lives within
