

Nuns are pioneers of women's education, not oppressors

The relentless modern portrayal of nuns as villains overlooks their role in inspiring a generation of women



Mother Superior at a Dominican convent in France for former prostitutes and criminals greets a new "little sister" (1946). Photograph: Walter Sanders/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Image

I can't imagine who'd want to be a nun these days. Small wonder they go around in disguise – most orders have ditched the habit and in France, entire convents are garbed in jeans. The benign wimple wearers of the BBC's *Call the Midwife*, returning to our screens this Christmas, are the exception. The rule is that, whether in fictional renderings or the latest news about the ongoing reparations for Ireland's Magdalene laundries, nuns are portrayed as hateful and heartless shrews.

This is the case in the film *Philomena*, about one woman's search for the son she was forced to give up for adoption by nuns in the 50s. There are sisters who say they are nervous they might be spat at in the street. And some critics have warned that devout Catholics should not go to Mary O'Malley's hilarious play *Once a Catholic* now on at Kilburn's Tricycle Theatre, because the nuns portrayed are such horrors.

It is true, some nuns have been oppressive and narrow-minded; but there is also a case for including religious sisters in the canon of feminism, certainly when it comes to the education of girls. It was Germaine Greer who pointed out that if Irish nuns hadn't tramped across the broiling Australian desert in the 19th century, young women in Australia would have had virtually no education.

And that's something I've noticed among many women of my own generation: even where they rebelled against the strictures of the Catholic church, or dropped the faith altogether, they have continued to value the nuns who schooled them and encouraged their ambition. Mary Robinson, Ireland's first female president, so admired the Sacred Heart nuns who taught her in Dublin that she seriously considered becoming one herself. Dear Maeve Binchy lost her faith as a young woman yet, until the end of her life, spoke with gratitude of the nuns who educated her at the Holy Child convent, and visited them often as an adult.

The late novelist and philanthropist Josephine Hart said the St Louis nuns opened her eyes to literature and poetry. Similarly, Nuala O'Faolain – who was an Oxford don at the age of 24 and had contempt for priests – felt a debt of gratitude to the St Louis nuns. Indeed, when I think of the Irish feminist movement with which I was involved in the 1970s, almost all of those women had been prompted in their spirit of independence by particular nuns. Sister Benvenuta, also known as historian and scholar Margaret MacCurtain, remains a stalwart of Irish feminism.

It is a staple of feminism that young girls in the past grew up with few choices or expectations. Marriage or the stigma of lifelong spinsterhood were seen as the main options. But at my convent school, marriage was seldom mentioned. These teachers were consecrated virgins – why would they exhort us to marriage? The role the nuns held before us wasn't wedlock but pioneering sainthood, such as St Catherine of Siena, who drank a cupful of leper's pus to show she wasn't afraid, or St Angela de Merici, who travelled all over Italy on horseback in the early 16th century tutoring girls. Fortitude and backbone were upheld as womanly virtues, rather than the pursuit of frivolities.

Certainly, there were women unsuited to convent life, and perhaps especially unsuited to the care of young single mothers – unconscious sexual jealousy must enter into the equation between a consecrated virgin and a pregnant teenager. It is also probable that nuns had a class bias. The convents that educated young ladies were high-minded and cultured, whereas the sisters who dealt with the lower orders often slapped the kids into submission.

Yet I am sorry for nuns when I see them being relentlessly portrayed as "the Gestapo in wimples", as Dave Allen once half-joked. I still have before me the image of poor Mother Peter Claver, a medieval scholar unsuited to teaching, who was driven to a nervous collapse at the St Trinian's-like conduct of our fourth form. Nuns, no doubt, can be cruel, but children can be cruel too, and I think the lesson I took from my own convent education was the immense variability of the human condition

