

**THE SYDNEY ‘HOUSE OF MERCY’:
THE MATER MISERICORDIAE SERVANTS’ HOME AND TRAINING SCHOOL,
1891 – 1919**

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The Mater Misericordiae Servants’ Home and Training School was opened by Mother Ignatius McQuoin of the Sisters of Mercy of St Patrick’s, Church Hill and North Sydney, in 1891. It operated in St Patrick’s parish (near present day Wynyard Railway Station) for about 20 years, before moving to Waverley in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, closing in 1919. It was not as illustrious or as long-lived as some other charitable institutions founded by these Sisters or others (Hughes 2003, 2010). It is of interest because it was a ‘House of Mercy’, a core undertaking for all Sisters of Mercy communities. However despite it being a central work there was a gap of some 26 years between the Sisters’ arrival in Sydney and the commencement of the Servant’s Home. An exploration of the possible reasons for this delay throws light on aspects of Sydney Catholic history in the period - particularly the work of women’s religious institutes - whilst raising other questions.

Background

The ‘English Sisters of Mercy’ community in Sydney was founded from Liverpool in late 1865 by Mother Ignatius McQuoin. She and her two companions (one a novice who subsequently left the community) were originally bound for Bathurst to join two Sisters who had gone there earlier on Archbishop Polding’s request. During the period of the voyage, the Diocese of Bathurst was created and the new bishop, Matthew Quinn, secured a community of Mercy Sisters from Ireland to work with him. Consequently Mother Ignatius and her companions remained in Sydney and were joined by the Sisters already at Bathurst. This change of plan meant that no accommodation had been prepared for them in Sydney.

The Sisters took up residence in St Patrick’s parish at Church Hill, under the charge of Archdeacon McEncroe, taking over the government-funded denominational schools there. McEncroe arranged the purchase of a house

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which served as a convent and which the Sisters altered to meet their needs. Because of fears the vendor might not sell if he knew the house was to become a convent it was not purchased directly by the Sisters (McQuoin n.d. p. 2). Thus, although burdened for some years by the mortgage and cost of alterations to the property, the Sisters were not the legal owners of the property. Mother Ignatius records that after the death in 1868 of Fr McEncroe - who had been a friend and supporter since her arrival in Sydney - a legal dispute arose as to the ownership of the convent property. The result was that it was declared Church property and was subsequently given to the newly arrived male community of French Marists, who had been invited to take over the parish and open schools for boys (McQuoin n.d. p. 4). The Sisters had to vacate their convent and start again in the former presbytery, paying for building alterations to make it suitable for the needs of women religious. Mother Ignatius felt this injustice keenly. She described McEncroe's death as having left her 'disconsolate... a stranger in the Colony, unknown and misunderstood ...' (McQuoin n.d. p. 2).

The situation became dire when the Sisters lost the two teachers' salaries, following Polding's direction that the school be withdrawn from the government system (Sisters of Mercy, n.d. a p. 3). As their remaining source of income was the meagre primary school fees, a 'select' or fee-paying high school was opened in the convent to supplement finances. The Sisters taught children in the schools by day, adults at night. They visited the poor and sick in their homes and dispensed material assistance from the convent door. This period was full of tribulations, similar to those experienced by the Sisters of Charity in the early years of their foundation nearly 30 years before - insecure and inadequate accommodation, income so low that daily existence was difficult, and too few members for the work which confronted them (O'Sullivan 1995; MacGinley 2002).

The Mercy community expanded over the years - basically to meet the demand for Catholic schools. In the early 1870s the Sisters opened a branch convent on the North Shore as a type of sanatorium for Sisters suffering from the cramped and unhealthy living conditions at St Patrick's. Shortly afterwards they were asked by local people to start a school. This brought more work and more financial strain, rather than the respite intended. In 1874 Mother Ignatius also responded to a request from the priest at Parramatta, Archdeacon Rigney, to commence a school there. Sisters and their pupils endured primitive conditions in the school buildings. Mother Ignatius wrote:

Very soon the fame of the infants' school caused a rapid increase

in numbers, and for their accommodation a shed was erected in the Playground where they went through their exercises to the astonishment of the passers by. The next addition was a stable fitted up with old desks and forms and the walls patched up with old sugar bags to keep out the dust and wind which at times, blew the copy books off the table. The number of children at this date on the Roll would be 200, 150 or so in ordinary attendance. (McQuoin n.d. p. 5)

The Sisters' account books show their ongoing struggle to make ends meet. Survival of the community became Mother Ignatius' greatest priority – thus there were simply insufficient resources to devote to charitable works such as a House of Mercy.

The original 'House of Mercy'

The Constitutions and Rule of the Sydney Mercy Sisters were the same as those of the original Dublin institute of some 30 or so years earlier. The institute's object included concern for the spiritual *and* temporal welfare of the poor, particularly women, as well as the spiritual improvement of the women who entered the institute.

The Sisters Must also have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of this institute of the Sisters of Mercy, that is a most serious application to the instruction of poor girls, visitation of the sick, and protection of women of good character. (Sisters of Mercy n.d.b Chapter One p.1)

Catherine McAuley, the Mercy foundress, wished not only to relieve immediate distress but also to provide a means for poor women to be able to earn a living (Killerby 1996). She provided general education (long denied the Irish by the penal laws) in schools, and vocational training for young women at the 'House of Mercy' she built in a fashionable part of Dublin. Catherine's perspective on Irish poverty included an awareness of structural factors, primarily the role of years of English oppression. She was of the same social circle as 'the Great Liberator', Daniel O'Connell. He opposed the extension of the English system of workhouses to Ireland (Burke 1987 pp. 29 - 27), as did Mother Mary Aikenhead, foundress of the Irish Sisters of Charity (O'Sullivan 1995 p. 7). O'Connell carved the Christmas roast at the House of Mercy in 1828, prior to it becoming a convent (Killerby 1996 p. 19).

Details of the Mercy Rule indicate that it was *not* assumed that temporal welfare would automatically follow from spiritual well-being.

Catherine believed in the dignity of the poor and their ability to support themselves once provided with the means to do so. The latter is obvious in that education and training are core works of the institute. The former is evident in the Rule's rationale for undertaking charitable works, and in the detailed prescription as to how the Sisters should carry out such work. The Mercy philosophy was trusting, and was not pre-occupied with questions of deservingness. Catherine wrote 'It is better to relieve a hundred imposters – if there be any such – than to suffer one really distressed person to be sent away empty' (Sisters of Mercy 1927 p. 136).

Mercy Sisters were bound by the Rule to have an attitude of compassion and respect for the poor, the ways of ensuring this being explicitly stated. The core documents state that residents of the House of Mercy were *not* to be treated as servants of the establishment but were there to be trained:

... and for this charitable object alone are the Sisters allowed to employ young women to assist them in domestic duties, not as servants, but that they may teach them; and always with due regard to their strength and health, on which these poor girls' future prospects so much depend (Sisters of Mercy 1869 p. 100).

This stance contrasts with the tenets of government charity in late nineteenth century New South Wales, where the overriding principles were that poverty was caused by individual moral failure, and that in assisting the poor one had to be very wary of helping those who were not 'deserving' as this only encouraged people to be dependent on assistance rather than developing self-reliance (Hughes 2002,2003). Others have commented on the 'Mercy Spirit': 'these responses to perceived needs were clearly not mere temporary solutions to the plight of the poor, especially women, but planned efforts to help the poor better their own lot' (Ryan 1996 p. 2). So this was Catherine McAuley's model of assistance to poor women in Ireland. Was it relevant for women in Sydney?

Women and employment in Sydney

At the beginning of the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were relatively few ways women could maintain themselves, although recent scholarship reveals a greater diversity than previously identified, particularly for women who ventured into business (Bishop, 2015). However for women without the necessary skills, capital or acumen the major respectable occupations were marriage and domestic service. The former was 'the only occupation to receive universal approval' (Fitzgerald 1987 p. 195), whereas

domestic service was seen as being only temporary, until women's 'true vocation' of marriage could be undertaken. Almost all types of women's employment were insecure and poorly paid, generally barely above poverty levels, perhaps with the exception of some who were self-employed. On average, wages for women were much less than for men, sometimes as low as a quarter of those paid to unskilled male labourers. The situation of middle-class women in Sydney was little better. There were limited openings for work as a governess or teacher, and these positions were also low-paid. Prostitution was sometimes the only other way women could stave off poverty (O'Brien 1988).

In Sydney not even marriage was available to all women because here women outnumbered men for most of the period. Fitzgerald demonstrated that the situation of Irish-born women was even less promising than for Sydney women in general, with a greater surplus of Irish-born women over men, 100 to 64 in the 1871 census. The result was that many Irish-born women remained unmarried and those who did marry experienced a 'marked downgrading of status'. Similarly many women in domestic service were employed beneath their former social position (Fitzgerald 1987 pp. 178 – 181).

There was a fairly high demand for domestic servants over the last 25 years of the century, reflected in the fact that assisted passage was available to female immigrants who declared their occupation was 'domestic servant' (Bishop 2015). However turnover was high, with dissatisfaction on both sides. Many girls from rural areas were not well-acquainted with what was required to help run a middle class household. Frustration with servants, particularly Irish girls, was legendary. For their part women and girls in domestic service were also frequently unhappy with how they were treated. They were also objects of ridicule in the press (Hogan 1987; O'Farrell 2000). Given that domestic service was a live-in occupation, an unemployed female servant was usually also a homeless servant. Cheap housing in Sydney was of a low material and moral standard (Fitzgerald 1987; O'Brien 1988). Affordable, clean and secure accommodation was a definite need. Although a residential Female School of Industry which trained girls for domestic service had been operating since 1826, Catholic girls were not admitted (Dickey 1987 p.10; Godden 1983 pp. 28ff).

When the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Sydney in 1865 there was an existing Catholic Servants' Home and Registry in Darlinghurst, but it closed a few years later (*Sands' Sydney Directories* 1863 - 1869). This home was associated with the Catholic Young Women's Benefit Society. Information

on this organisation comes from the memoirs of Father John Felix Sheridan, an Irishman and Benedictine priest, described as being ‘one of the leading social workers in Sydney’ (O’Brien 1952 p. 65). From 1877 until 1883 Sheridan was Vicar General of the Sydney Archdiocese with responsibility for St Francis’ parish in the Haymarket, having previously (1857 – 1864) been in charge of the Darlinghurst District. His memoirs state that he founded a Catholic Young Women’s Benefit Society and opened a Servants’ Home and Registry ‘with a matron of his own choosing’ in Darlinghurst (Sheridan n.d.; O’Brien 1952 p. 65; Duffy 1976; Cashman 1985). Sheridan’s memoirs state that the establishment closed when the property was resumed by the government, and the 1869 *Sands’ Directory* confirms this. Mother Ignatius perceived correctly that there was a need for a ‘House of Mercy’ in Sydney. Her desire to provide accommodation and training in line with Mercy aims was a pragmatic and appropriate response to the prevailing social conditions in Sydney on her arrival.

The Mater Misericordiae Servants’ Home and Training School

As indicated above the early years of the Sisters of Mercy foundation at the Rocks were not conducive to opening a ‘House of Mercy’. There were insufficient resources of personnel and finance as well as inadequate accommodation for the Sisters to do this in conjunction with their convent at St Patrick’s. The history written by Mother Ignatius states that she approached Archbishop Vaughan about her wish:

The Superioress began to hope to see her desire realized – however receiving no co-operation without and having no means, she laid her earnest wish before the Archbishop, Dr Vaughan, and through her instrumentality, a Servants’ Home was opened and placed under the care of a matron, the Sisters simply taking upon themselves to visit and instruct the girls, and encourage the matron by their patronage. Still this was not the institution proposed by our Holy Foundress and other works being proposed viz, Schools etc., Branch Houses were opened and the Boarding School in like manner, to meet the wants of the time and pay off the debts incurred. (McQuoin n.d. p.7)

This home opened in 1877 in Elizabeth St, Sydney and was a joint venture with the Catholic Young Women’s Benefit Association, whose president was matron (Price 1987 p.7; Sheridan nd; *Freeman’s Journal* 8th September 1877 p. 14; *Sands Directories* 1879). This was the same model as the previous Servants’ Home at Darlinghurst which closed in 1869. In September 1977

Mother Ignatius wrote 'the Home in Elizabeth Street takes very well but everyone says the servants want training so they must help me to build a House of Mercy' (McQuoin to n.k. 17th September 1877). A notice in the Sydney *Freeman's Journal* the following May confirms that the Servants' Home was operating and that Mother Ignatius was pursuing her intention of establishing the House of Mercy Training School:

THE SISTERS OF MERCY

of

ST. PATRICK'S SYDNEY

Having succeeded in establishing – though on a small scale - a Home for Female servants, are desirous of extending their sphere of usefulness by supplying a still existing want, viz: - That of a training school for young women desirous of learning the various duties of domestic life. The want of an institution of the kind is generally felt by the ladies of Sydney, and the colony generally, but hitherto the Sisters have not been able to undertake this good work for want of proper accommodation.

They propose having a Bazaar, in September next, in order to raise funds to build a house in connection with the Convent, where the young women will be under their immediate care, and where they will be taught, in a practical manner, Cooking, Laundry, Housework, Sewing, &c.; in fine [?] trained to fill any situation for which they may be fitted.

The notice goes on to say that:

His Grace the Archbishop fully approves of the undertaking, and the Very Rev. the Vicar General and the Revd. Marist fathers will gladly receive donations in money or goods for the above purposes. Subscriptions also will be gratefully received by the Sisters of Mercy, St Patrick's. (*Freeman's Journal* 18th May 1878 p. 10)

It seems however that there were still difficulties for Mother Ignatius. A report of a meeting at St Patrick's Hall the following month indicates that there was disagreement about where the training school should be:

Catholic Female Home and Registry Office

A meeting of the committee in connection with this object was held in St Patrick's hall on Wednesday evening last, the very Rev. the Vicar General in the chair. There was a full attendance

of clergymen and laymen. The question having been mooted as to where the Home and Registry Office should be erected, and it having transpired that the intention of the reverend mother was to place it on the North Shore in connection with the branch convent there, it was the opinion of the meeting that it would be necessary to have the institution in Sydney as at present. The Rev. Mother not being able to acquiesce in this opinion it was unanimously resolved to suspend all action in the matter for the present and to return the subscriptions received. (*Freeman's Journal* 8th June 1878: 14).

This was a fairly unusual report for several reasons. First, it seems to be the only report of conflict between Sisters and other members of the Catholic community reported by the *Freeman's Journal* in this quarter century. The *Freeman's* was one of the main champions of the Catholic hierarchy, clergy, religious and lay community in the incessant sectarian warfare that characterised the period (Hughes 2002). Additionally, to give back money already contributed was unheard of in that era of frantic school building and fundraising.

In the absence of hard evidence it is possible only to speculate on the reasons for the lack of agreement and paucity of support for the Sisters' plans. Their Mother House and Novitiate, where the labour resources to run the training school were located, were moving to North Sydney. Mother Ignatius no doubt thought it impossible to open the training school in Sydney because the existing convent there was totally unsuitable. To acquire new premises south of the harbour would not be feasible because the Sisters were so heavily in debt for the new convent at North Sydney. It is interesting that the meeting chair, the Vicar General, was Fr John Sheridan who had some responsibility for the earlier Servant's Home in Darlinghurst under a lay matron with Sisters visiting. Besides being second-in-charge of the Archdiocese he was a renowned fundraiser, having rapidly cleared debts on the House of the Good Shepherd and St Francis' parish (Sheridan n.d. pp.3-4). If he had been in favour of the House of Mercy being located on the North Shore as Mother Ignatius wished, it is highly unlikely the laymen at the meeting would have opposed him.

There is a report some five weeks later of a fundraising event for the existing 'Female Home' (under the superintendence of a lay Matron). 'On Monday evening last a very pleasing entertainment was given in St Francis' Hall in aid of the Female Home, Elizabeth Street and the Cooks' River Presbytery Furnishing Fund. There was a large attendance...' (*Freeman's Journal* 8th July 20th 1878 p.14). The home was located in St Francis' parish,

which was under the control of Fr. Sheridan. It is possible that he favoured this model (as well as its location), rather than Mother Ignatius' proposal.

Mother Ignatius did not give up her dream of opening a 'House of Mercy' training school and home. She persisted in fundraising, advertising the bazaar planned for later in the year which '... will be opened by His Grace, Most Reverend Roger Bede Vaughan. The Hon. Lady Robinson has kindly signified her intention of being present at the opening ...' (*Freeman's Journal* 23rd Nov. 1878 p. 11). The bazaar was duly held on 25th November 1878, however the report the following week indicates only £50 was taken on the first day (*Freeman's Journal* 30th Nov. 30 1878 pp. 14-5). This is less than usual for such an event, especially one opened by Archbishop Vaughan, a renowned public speaker who attracted standing room only crowds to his Charity Sermons in St Mary's Cathedral. Contrary to the usual pattern of reporting there was no account of the close of the bazaar, nor the total profits. It is notable that the text of Archbishop Vaughan's address at the opening of the bazaar indicates that it was intended that the Home and Training School eventually would be located on the North Shore.

At the time of the bazaar, the Sisters of Mercy were in the process of purchasing the Monte Sant'Angelo property at North Sydney, which cost over £7,000 and there was also the expense of alterations necessary before the Sisters could move in (McQuoin n.d. p.6). The Mercy account books reveal that from 1879 to at least 1887 Mother Ignatius had to cope with a great deal of building debt. (September 1879, £663 paid 'builder last payment'; March 1882, £350 paid to 'Mr Hayes'; May 1883 '3rd installment' of £500' to the same person; November 1883, £2,500 borrowed from the 'Oriental Bank' and in January 1887, £550 borrowed from the same source, and an identical amount was 'paid to Mr Hayes, contractor') (Sisters of Mercy, Account Book Monte Sant'Angelo 1879 – 1904).

It is likely that Mother Ignatius' desire to build a Servants' Home and Training School was not shared by the clergy and lay community, for whom schools and support of the existing, established Catholic charitable institutions in Sydney (such as St Vincent's Hospital and the House of the Good Shepherd Refuge) were the priorities at the time. An additional factor was possibly the Englishness, as opposed to Irishness, of the Mercy community. The Sisters were known as the 'English Sisters of Mercy' whereas the local Sydney Catholic community was overwhelmingly of Irish descent. It would not have helped matters that the Sisters received support on the North Shore from a local English, Protestant family, the Whitings. Mr G.R. Whiting acted as financial adviser and agent over a number of

years, assisting the Sisters with selling their initially-purchased small property at North Sydney and buying the Monte Sant'Angelo one after his wife suggested it would suit the Sisters' needs (Whiting to McQuoin 14th July 1879). Whiting acted as guarantor for the substantial mortgage on the latter and the Sisters' account books indicate that he gave them money on at least one occasion, including £100 in 1882 (Whiting to McQuoin 14th July 1879; Sisters of Mercy Account Book St Patrick's and Monte Sant'Angelo 1866 -1882, March 1882). Nothing more seems to have happened in relation to the House of Mercy until 1891 when it is reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the 'Mater Misericordiae Servants' Home and Training School' opened in Princes St, at the Rocks in St Patrick's parish with a committee of laywomen assisting in fitting it out (*Sydney Morning Herald* 28th September 1891 p. 6).

What is known about the operation of the Sydney 'House of Mercy'?

From Sisters of Mercy annual reports, appeals and account books as well as press reports we know a little. Significantly Mother Ignatius' wish to have the home and training school near the convent on the North Shore never eventuated. As stated above the establishment operated from 1891 until 1919, but was in rented premises for the first 20 years. From 1891 to 1894 it was at 29 Princes St (in the former Goodenough Naval Home) adjacent to the Argyle Cut in the Rocks (*Sydney Morning Herald* 28th September 1891 p. 6); then at 17 Lang St, Church Hill until 1911. The relocation to Waverley in 1911 was said to be partly to escape the noise and smoke of the nearby electric power station (*The Catholic Press* 26th October 1911 p. 23). From 1911 until its closure in 1919 the Home was situated in the eastern Sydney suburb of Waverley (at 10 -12 Llandaff St).

The Home was opened in the Rocks in 1891 with great ceremony by Cardinal Moran. A number of clergy, lay dignitaries and at least 20 ladies who formed the Committee were also present, including the Mayoress of Sydney. As well as the Cardinal the Postmaster General, Mr Daniel O'Connor, also made a speech in support of the new institution (*Sydney Morning Herald* 28th September 1891, p. 6). Similar pomp was evident at the opening of the 'new Home' by Archbishop Kelly in Waverley in 1911 with speeches by him and two members of state parliament. Women of all denominations, provided they were 'of good character' were admitted to the home and inability to pay was no barrier to entry. In 1902 300 women were accommodated over the year with '57 in situations, giving the best satisfaction', in 1911 the number accommodated was 200 per annum 'on

average'. Prospective employers were charged a fee and the situations they offered were vetted for suitability (*The Catholic Press* 24th May 1902 p. 12; 26th October 1911 p. 23).

As reported by the Sisters and the press, the assistance provided by the Home seems consistent with the original prescriptions set out by the Mercy foundress Catherine McAuley. The memoirs of the Sisters state that: 'here respectable girls were trained for domestic service and servants out of employment came to rest while waiting re-employment' (Sisters of Mercy n.d. a). Press reports from 1891, 1902 and 1911 reiterated this, with the latter two emphasising that the Home provided safe accommodation for girls newly arrived in Sydney from rural areas or overseas thereby 'preserving them from evil associations'. The high quality of those trained by the Home was emphasised and it was stated that demand exceeded supply. 'Girls from the Home are eagerly sought by mistresses in town and country, including many Protestant ministers' wives' (*The Catholic Press* 24th May 1902, p.12). The role of the Home in enabling servants to recuperate from ill-health and exhaustion from overwork was expanded on in the later reports. What was not stated but perhaps generally understood at the time was that these conditions were likely to have rendered servants unemployed and therefore at risk of 'evil associations' and/or homelessness.

The Mercy ethos of providing education and training to women to enable their economic self-sufficiency is reflected in the tuition provided at the Home: 'laundry work, cookery in all its branches, needlework, reading, writing and arithmetic' (*The Catholic Press* 26th October 1911 p. 23). The reports also indicate that care was taken to interview prospective employers so that an appropriate choice could be made by matching employer to employee '...it is one of the principles of the management not to recommend persons for employment in any capacity the duties of which they may not be capable of fulfilling' (Sisters of Mercy 1891).

The account books of the Home provide additional information on its operation. They show that wages were paid to at least some staff, consistent with Catherine McAuley's instruction that residents were not to be regarded as servants, and were to undertake work only as part of their training. There are entries for 'clothing purchased for poor girls'. Like their Irish foundress the Sisters of Mercy in Sydney were mindful of ensuring the employment prospects and longer-term well-being of young women.

What the account books also reveal is that the Home struggled financially at times. In some months the board paid by residents was less than the rent on the premises, with the books only balancing thanks to

'loans from Rev. Mother'. In 1894, the year of Mother Ignatius' death, there is a record of a 'loan from Bridget Gorman'. This loan was not repaid until 1898, and without the interest originally indicated. A substantial portion of the Home's regular income in the early years was derived from 'socials' or dances, with a lesser sum coming from other fundraising events. At various times 'music lessons', presumably given by the Sisters, also brought in money as did subscriptions and donations, none of which however were consistent or significant features over the years. In 1902 the Home was said to be 'urgently in need of funds' and an appeal was launched (*The Catholic Press* 24th May 1902, p.12). However, in spite of the poor financial situation of the Home assistance was still given to needy people, evidenced by the entries in most months of at least a few shillings paid out to 'the poor'.

Regarding the closure of the Home in 1919 the records state that:

On the introduction to Sydney of various industrial factories young girls gave up domestic service and went into the factories, enticed by the prospect of higher wages and more free time for amusement. There was therefore no longer need for the House of Mercy, however it was kept open for a few years as a guest house for Sisters coming to Sydney from the country but was closed on the 21st June 1919'.
(Sisters of Mercy n.d.a)

The available material leaves a number of questions unanswered. Why did it take so long for the House of Mercy to open? Why did it struggle when it did open? The second question is probably easier to answer than the first. The Home and Training School opened in 1891 with great support from the Ladies' Committee who are said to have furnished all the rooms, and £110 being donated at the opening 'the Cardinal leading the list with £10' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 28th September 1891, p. 6). However, with the 1890s Depression everyone had less money, including the Sisters, many prospective employers of servants and those who might offer financial support. Another possibility is that the Home was not perceived as being so 'deserving' of support as some of the other charities run by women religious, such as the various institutions for children, the elderly and the sick or incapacitated. By the 1890s the number of such establishments requiring financial support from the community had increased. In 1900 there were nine other institutional charities run by women religious in the Sydney Archdiocese (Hughes 2002, pp. 37-38).

It seems that fewer young women were choosing domestic service and perhaps those who did were more prepared because of better educational provision in Catholic schools. There also was an increase in employment

options. Factory work had increased, and no doubt was an attractive alternative, despite a general public outcry against it for various reasons including aggravating the shortage of domestic servants, fear of the deleterious effects on physical and moral well-being of young women and the quality of the offspring of these potential mothers, as well as the perceived threat to male employment opportunities and wages (Kingston 1975, p. 69; O'Brien 1988, p. 93). There were also greater opportunities for middle-class women; compulsory education meant there was a greater demand for teachers. The other area of growth in women's employment was the public service. With domestic service no longer the 'default' occupation for women, there was less need for a servants' home and training school.

Thus there are a number of possible reasons why the House of Mercy did not thrive once opened, but answers to the question of why planning for the home stalled in 1878 for 13 years are not so obvious. I think possible factors lie within the Catholic community, which had other priorities in the 1870s and 1880s. The imminent cessation of government funding for denominational schools meant that building and staffing of Catholic schools became urgent. As noted earlier, from the late 1870s the Sisters of Mercy were undertaking building work at Monte Sant'Angelo. They were also opening schools then convents at various locations on the North shore and in the inner suburbs of Sydney (Pymble, Lavender Bay, Waterloo, Erskineville, Rosebery).

There are indications that the relationships between Mother Ignatius and others in the Catholic community were not always conducive to her gaining the support she needed. She said that she felt unsupported after the death of Fr McEncroe in 1868. The strength of opposition to her plans at the meeting at St Patrick's in 1878 was certainly unusual. It may not have been solely to do with the proposed location. There were other issues. St Patrick's parish was under the care of the Marists – there may not have been an uncomplicated relationship with them because of the earlier unpleasantness to do with ownership of the convent. When the Marists arrived the Sisters were asked to leave the convent, which they thought they owned and which they had paid off and renovated with hard-earned money eked out from school fees. The Sisters' relationship with parts of the local lay community may also have been strained. The Sisters had closed the boys' school, finding the Rocks boys so unruly that they could not effectively teach them. This would have made them less than popular. As discussed earlier the fact that the Sisters were a foundation from England, not Ireland may also have been an issue in relations with an Irish-identifying lay community.

Another possible factor was Fr John Sheridan, as discussed above. Did he not support Mother Ignatius' plans to open a House of Mercy in conjunction with the convent because he favoured the existing model of a home under the auspices of the Catholic Young Women's Benefit Association (which he had founded) supervised by a lay matron?

The story of the Sydney House of Mercy demonstrates that in late nineteenth century Sydney it was not simple or straightforward for women's religious institutes to undertake the works of charity and mercy for which they had been founded. Unlike their foremothers in Ireland they had to contend with establishing and maintaining themselves financially. They also had to adapt to the local conditions which included a poor standard of housing and primitive infrastructure such as transport, roads, sanitation and water. Additionally, Australian women's religious institutes in the nineteenth century were constrained by a Church hierarchy struggling with insufficient resources to meet spiritual and educational needs. The withdrawal of government assistance for education resulted in schooling becoming the priority for all of the Catholic community including the religious institutes. The Catholic population had many demands on its financial resources and was on the whole not wealthy. For the Sisters of Mercy the delay in undertaking one of the core works of their institute meant that by the time it did commence, its financial viability became more difficult. Social changes such as a reduction in female migration from Ireland and wider employment opportunities for women in Sydney meant that in the early years of the twentieth century the need for a Servants' Home and Training School was not as great as when the sisters arrived in Sydney in 1865.

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