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# Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their Life in the English Speaking World, 1891-1965 (Book Review)

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**BOOK REVIEW****Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their Life in the English Speaking World, 1891-1965**

Tom O'Donoghue

NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

215 pages; \$95.00 USD (hardcover)

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As Irish citizens were being scattered around the globe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by famine, eviction, emigration, and transportation, the country was producing vocations to the priesthood and religious life in numbers greater than the island was able to contain. The missionary emigration of Irish female religious has seen significant historiographical work in the past 20 years, as has the notion of Irish missionaries as an arm of an Irish Catholic “spiritual empire” that paralleled and was subservient to the ends of the British Empire in which it did most of its work. The role of male teaching orders and the internal workings of these orders have received little to no attention. The rapid rise, spectacular fall, and the significant role played by teaching brothers in Ireland, Australia, and in the United States are finally explored in Tom O'Donoghue's *Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their life in the English speaking world, 1891-1965*.

Aware that his book is groundbreaking, O'Donoghue states that this work is but a beginning in this area, and as such he chose to examine those elements of the experiences of teaching brothers that were generally common to most groups of brothers. This is understandable, and, as O'Donoghue suggests, it leaves the reader with many questions about national or local peculiarities that can only be answered by future research. At the same time, it creates the impression that differences in the lived experience of teaching brothers in different countries were minimal. He concentrates on the Irish Christian Brothers and the Marist Brothers, although he makes occasional mention of the Xaverian Brothers and the Marianists (who only came from America to open one school in Ireland in 1967 and have been in Australia for an even shorter time).

While focusing mainly on secondary sources, O'Donoghue also makes use of anecdotal evidence from published memoirs and recollections. The strongest sections of the book are the chapters on recruitment and induction into the life of the order. His familiarity with his subject is clear as he is able to tease evidence out of the rules and constitutions of these orders. Boys were recruited into the orders through their families, through personal contact with brothers in their classrooms, through professionally produced recruitment literature, and by recruiting specialists brought in to schools and parishes. Once a young man (often in his mid-teens) entered the order, his formation was a slow, steady psycho-spiritual breakdown of the "old man" through self-abnegation and the replacement of an individual outlook with a collective or community identity. In varying forms and in often gentler terms this death to self is common to most Christian spiritual experiences.

Once teaching brothers were broken, however, the anti-intellectualism of most teaching orders discouraged the type of encounter with speculative theology or with traditional monastic, mendicant, Salesian, or Ignatian masters of the spiritual life that often produce great spiritual fruit and heroic sacrifice. That the teaching orders produced heroic spiritual men is probable; however, the system was not devised to create mystics but rather to create and ensure a homogenous educational workforce. As O'Donoghue states in a section of the book discussing the incidence of sexual abuse of students that has rocked the church in the English speaking world for the past 20 years, further research needs to be done into the sexual repression that appears to have been part of the formation of these men. He correctly points out that the rules and constitutions of these orders foresaw the possibility of untoward occurrences, and concludes that the constant activity and busyness characteristic of life as a teaching brother was intended as a preventative to loneliness and to the development of inappropriate relationships with students or with other brothers.

Without looking at archival sources, O'Donoghue has a tendency to assume that official pronouncements from Rome or from the two Vatican councils translated almost directly into lived experience. All of these orders were founded in the early modern period or just after the French Revolution, but the explosion in the numbers of men in teaching orders as an institutional response was designed to combat the Modernist heresy condemned by Pius X, as the Church altered its stance from insulating itself against Modernism to declaring open combat upon it. This is true, but the particular

ways in which this motivation for the explosion of schools worked itself out in practice differed from country to country. At roughly the same time that Horace Mann's common school was helping to shape compulsory schooling in America the British government enacted the Education Ireland Act of 1831 setting up the national school system. In America, a system of Catholic schools parallel to the public state schools developed as a prophylactic against Protestant threats to the faith. This fear of children losing the faith (or losing ethnic identity) in public schools continued to animate US Catholic school leaders well into the 20th century. Opposition to Dewey and progressive "child centered" education was added to this, and later American Catholic schools became bastions of anti-Communism. In Ireland, meanwhile, the church was involved from the beginning with the national schools, which were part of the campaign to anglicize Ireland. In the 20th century, the teaching brothers were at the fore of Irish nationalist movements, but they also continued to be agents of anglicization and, in Australia, of colonialism. These differences need to be pulled apart and examined individually.

Similarly, O'Donoghue takes Vatican II's pronouncement on lay vocation and assumes that it was realized in the schools. Religious orders treated lay teachers as employees and not as collaborators in mission before the Council. After the Council, this condition persisted in most places no matter what the Council said about the lay vocation. The schools were the first places where lay Catholics played significant roles in the post conciliar church yet little was done institutionally either to encourage or to prepare them for this responsibility. Many orders simply abandoned the schools as they lost faith in what the schools sought to accomplish. In the US, the national bishops' conference gave no attention to the phenomenon of lay people staffing schools until the 1990s. Catholic schools persisted in many places in spite of the efforts of many priests and religious orders to ignore or abandon them. In Ireland, poorly catechized lay teachers have ultimately contributed in no small measure to the rapid secularization of Irish society.

Early in the book, O'Donoghue goes to great length explaining the difference between schools directly sponsored by teaching orders and those staffed by orders and owned by dioceses. Since Vatican II it has been those schools sponsored by the orders that have survived—and in many cases thrived—while diocesan schools in which teaching orders did not have a proprietary interest have tended to suffer or to fail. Where teaching brothers worked within both types of schools it would be important to know to what extent

this phenomenon holds true, as well as to examine how deeply teaching orders of brothers questioned the very premise on which their schools were founded, as so many female religious orders did in the wake of the Council. O'Donoghue has clearly pointed a way for his own future research and/or for a generation of doctoral students to explore.

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