

**THE ROLE OF TEXTS IN A DATABASE:
MULTIPLE APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION ‘WHO WERE THE
NUNS?’**

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Section A: Origins and planning of the database

See website <http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/index.html>

Defining the purpose of a database and envisioning what it is for is crucial from an early stage since it affects the structure and design of the database. For the *Who were the Nuns?* project it was prosopographical. The database aimed at identifying members using comparable data, and compiling a biographical register. It itemized a complete list of membership of all English convents in exile 1600-1800, identified missing data then located other ways of sourcing data to populate the database.

The first aim of the project was to establish a comprehensive and easily searchable database of members of the English convents in exile. But establishing such a database primarily for others to use is no longer interesting to many funding bodies: a project has to have its own rationale as prime focus.

The overall aim of the project was reflected in its title as a research question; *Who were the Nuns?* We wanted to understand convent communities better, their composition, their connections and their supporters’ connections, their cultural significance and the impact of exile. This required more than counting members and providing statistics.

For instance: one of the ways of understanding the lived experience of the members was to link existing published texts to individual entries within the database. A number of conventual texts were published by the Catholic Record Society at the beginning of the twentieth century and were thus out of copyright: a selection of these were scanned and re-edited by Dr James Kelly.¹ Using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS:ti the texts were coded and linked to be readily accessible when searching for individuals (under the heading ‘Quotations’). This established the principle that texts could be successfully linked within the database: if further funding were to be obtained this could be developed effectively.

As a substantial publicly-funded project, it was important to ensure that others who might have different research agendas could use the database. What would they be looking for? For example literary scholars might wish to look up a name found inscribed in a book. Others might wish to find family connections including mothers in a straightforward manner. Some historians were investigating

¹ Dr Kelly later moved on to develop family network charts and other areas. These texts are also found on the project website under the heading ‘Publications’.
<http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/publications/index.html>

the background of members before they entered convents. Other scholars working on particular communities might wish to list members in a community. A number of catalogues of libraries from the convents have been made since the project started: the librarian concerned has made extensive use of the lists.

Problems were encountered in populating the database, such as missing data, fuzzy data, varying spellings of names, the unequal survival of sources. Questions arose: how should these gaps be overcome? On what basis could additional names be supplied from sources outside convents? A distinction was made between the data relating to members and to their families. Data relating to members was taken from convent sources. Where parental data was missing this might be supplied through external sources and is specifically explained in the note field. Dr Katharine Keats-Rohan who created the family trees (using standard Family History software) attached to the database worked from primary sources as far as possible, supplementing these from research published through family historians and the website Stirnet <http://www.stirnet.com/genie/>. The decision taken not to add any calculations of age derived from data by members of the project, but to use only ages given by sources even though this might leave gaps.

A key problem for the project was how to approach privately-owned manuscript texts, in this case still held by monastic communities. All communities approached were very generous in granting access to researchers from the project and permitting taking images of the manuscripts to be worked on at the office. However many collections are still uncatalogued or not fully catalogued and some convents closed and moved during the project. We needed to respect the privacy of the communities. The photographs were used to supply details for the database and later permission was granted to use some texts in the collection of texts later published by Pickering and Chatto.² Public repositories on the Continent were listed in a Calendar published on the website, see <http://www2.history.qmul.ac.uk/wwtn/pdfs/ArchiveCalendarfinal2.pdf>

The spelling of names for members follows that given in conventual sources as far as possible. This does in some cases mean that sisters have their surnames spelled differently if they entered at different convents. For parents and associated persons surnames have been standardized as far as possible. Variations of spelling are provided in the 'Surname' search.

To avoid complexity of referencing, the decision was taken not to identify source of each piece of data separately, but sources whether printed or manuscript are supplied on an individual entry. Given the number of privately owned sources many cannot be checked back to the repository by users of the database, but can be confirmed from images at the project office.

Additional data and analysis has been provided as a result of extended funding and is incorporated into the new version of the website. Analytical tools requested by scholars working on convents including lists sorted by profession date or death date: calculations of average age at entry, length of convent career. Maps (some interactive) showing distribution of families in selected areas where sufficient data exists are about to be added (Summer 2013).

² See below.

Decisions about software and design are also extremely important. The choice of the Technical Manager is crucial to the success of the whole enterprise: a project such as this must have someone who understands historical or literary sources. Dr Jan Broadway, Technical Officer, was ideal for the project as a trained historian and early modernist, who added computer skills. From experience, it is better to have someone who starts on the humanities side and adds computing later. Many computer people do not understand what humanities projects are about and the specific needs of historical data. Most humanities projects do not need complicated computing techniques: they are often at the simple end of the spectrum as far as design and coding are concerned.

For a project like this one, you need to make sure the project uses open source software so that the publicly funded database is accessible, updateable, inter-operable, freely downloadable. Instructions to new users should be clear, easy to follow and grant access to key searches in a straightforward way.

Section B - Texts and the database (selected slides)

1: Texts, editing and the database

- The relationship between the texts and the database is complex.
- ‘Who were the nuns?’ means not only their names and their family origins, but also understanding their relationship to their surroundings i.e. the space where they lived (the convent) and their life (the religious life as lived by their order).
- Data was extracted from a range of texts and used to populate the database. The sources for each individual are given on her page.
- We needed to establish link between entry for an individual and texts related to her: we did this by using published but out of copyright sources. Question: how to approach privately-owned manuscript texts, could they be displayed?

2: Range of manuscript texts outside the database

Additional membership documents were used to complement the information on the database, such as

- profession and obituary books (those not already published by Catholic Record Society).
- for history writing: chronicles and annals
- for life writing: saints’ lives, convent founders’ lives, other exemplary lives including martyrs related to the convents. Obituaries can also be included here
- for administrative writing/record keeping: Chapter Books and Council Books, Accounts, ‘How to’ manuals for specific offices, Constitutions, letters
- for management advice: strategic interpretation of role of Superior combining experience in practice with advice in prescriptive texts
- for liturgical works: those written ‘in house’ if nothing appropriate was available in print

- for spiritual writing: meditations, prayers, instructions for retreats

These texts remain outside the database because they are owned by monastic communities, although some data is derived from them. A number of them are gradually being published and becoming accessible to scholars through the generosity of the communities in allowing them to be transcribed and published.

3. Some statistics from the database to illustrate the scale of the project and some key interpretive issues.

- 22 enclosed convents: 21 of these new foundations. These were institutions needing to build libraries, establish new identities, create their own histories based on their own creative efforts.
- One closed before the French Revolution: Pontoise in 1786
- 7 orders: Franciscans (including Poor Clares and Conceptionists), Benedictines, Sepulchrines, Augustinians, Bridgettines, Carmelites, Dominicans
- 14 Houses of Mary Ward sisters
- 3907 members identified; plus a number of entrants who did not remain in the convent till death – the ‘early leavers’.
- Americans: 67 members in 14 different convents in the eighteenth century. Result of increasing discrimination in Maryland against Catholics. The first English convent was established by Carmelites in Port Tobacco, Maryland in 1790.
- Converts: 97 identified so far. Many of these were daughters of mixed marriages. They represent altered perceptions of the Catholic communities over two centuries, and should not be seen as excluded or separated on every level from mainstream society, cultural and political. Many families who sent their daughters to the convents were part of the landed elites, but other social groups represented.

[In the presentation, there followed slides giving examples of different kinds of texts and buildings from a range of repositories monastic and secular related to the work of the Who were the Nuns? project.]

A collection of sources illustrating different aspects of life and work in the English convents in exile (already referenced in the presentation) has been published by Pickering and Chatto, 2012-13.³ These texts are intended to allow further study of the convents, particularly if used in conjunction with the database. The publication also allows me to mention a key group of people involved in the project: volunteer transcribers, whose work was crucial to the existence of the volumes. One in particular became a regular member of the office over three years. There exists also a number of other related projects: we are now planning our own publications of sources on the website, as well as additional mapping and illustrations to be added to the database.

³ *English convents in Exile 1600-1800*, General Editor Caroline Bowden, 6 Vols., Pickering and Chatto, 2012-13. Vol. 2 *Spirituality*, ed. Laurence Lux-Sterritt.

Section C: Editorial principles and practice in the project

In conclusion (and in part to compensate for the paper that Nicky Hallett's illness prevented her from presenting on texts at this session) I would like to take a closer look at editorial practice within the project. From the beginning it has been the aim of the project to make more of the manuscripts from the English convents in exile accessible to students, scholars and to everyone interested in the history of the convents. We are very grateful to the communities for agreeing to allow us permission to photograph pages initially to provide data for the database and later to transcribe the manuscripts for publication. Michael Hunter's book, *Editing Early Modern Texts: An Introduction to Principles and Practice*⁴ was used for guidance on appropriate editorial guidelines. Pickering and Chatto placed certain constraints on what was possible editorially in the collection. Rules of transcription were provided to each volunteer when they were recruited and to each volume editor. It has proved challenging to reach firm conclusions because of the range of texts involved and the number of people.

This paragraph is taken from my introduction to the collection of sources: 'Editorial policy throughout has been to render the manuscripts in a readable format while reducing the number of editorial interventions which interrupt the flow of the text. Contractions have been silently expanded. The use of u and v: i and j have been modernized. Archaisms including yt and ye have been modernized and expanded: otherwise the spelling is as in the original. Corrections and deletions have been placed in the text where they appear. Additional punctuation has been inserted where very long sentences would have led to a loss of clarity. In a few documents (such as the Rouen Chronicles) the nuns used capitals heavily for almost every noun, and in such cases the number of capitals within sentences has been reduced. This has been noted in the editorial next to the document. Writing practice varied across the convents and, unless stated, editors have retained the capitalization of the original. Capitals have been retained for religious titles such as Mother, Sister and Brother in order to distinguish them from blood relatives. Underlining appears as given in the original. Annotations are used to identify individuals, religious customs and terminology and to explain obscurities in the text. References to nuns give dates of profession and death and the Who were the Nuns? database identifying number in order to locate further details. References to others give (wherever possible) dates of birth and death. The names of male religious who use aliases are given as they appear in the quoted sources.'

This led to discussion on a number of topics, including: design of databases, accessibility, editing standards.

The author would be happy to follow up aspects of this talk: please email c.bowden@qmul.ac.uk

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⁴ Michael Hunter, *Editing Early Modern Texts: An Introduction to Principles and Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009.