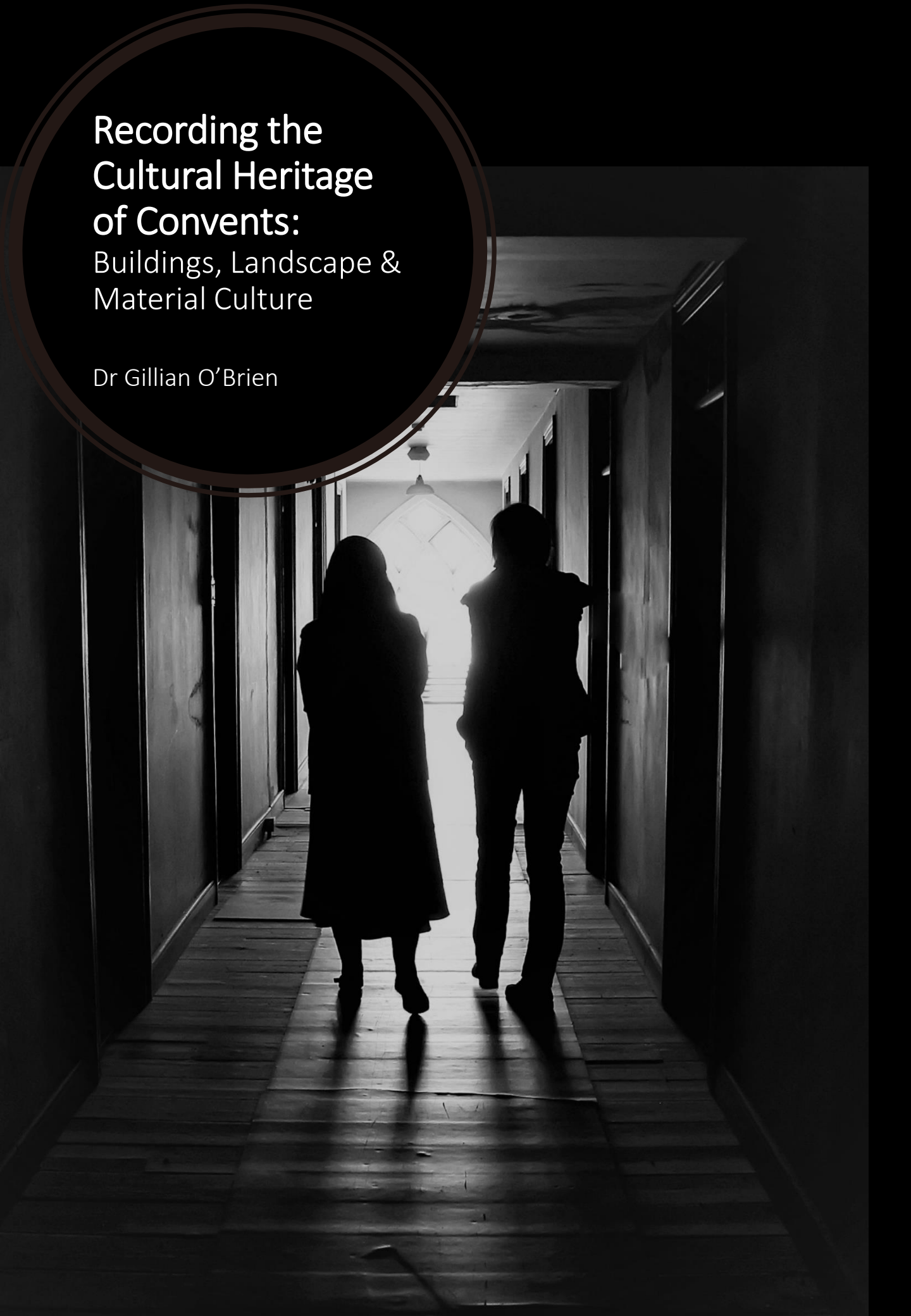


Recording the Cultural Heritage of Convents: Buildings, Landscape & Material Culture

Dr Gillian O'Brien





Introduction

This report draws from a wide range of disciplines and combines expertise in architectural and landscape history, social and economic history with the history of material culture. The report has two interlinked aims: a) to raise awareness of the urgent necessity to record convents and land associated with female religious orders and, b) to suggest ways to record the material culture and architectural and landscape heritage of Irish convents.

There has been limited scholarly interest in the history of convents and their associated buildings and landscapes. It is vital that these sites are recorded now before the inevitable destruction or transformation of the buildings as they are repurposed, sold or demolished. Generally, where the buildings are still in use as convents, they are very well maintained. However, they are closing at a fast rate and as soon as they are no longer in use as convents they are at immediate risk of deterioration. When a convent closes internal elements are removed and sold on, and very often the buildings are speculatively bought and not put to immediate use.

Lack of use of these convent buildings is the biggest risk to their survival. As soon as maintenance is withdrawn the structures very often decline rapidly and much internal fabric undergoes irreparable damage. Frequently there is water ingress followed by inevitable rot. The situation is exacerbated by lack of regular monitoring and by boarding up the buildings, which decreases natural ventilation.

Convent buildings contain a wealth of features of architectural, artistic, social, historical and cultural significance which are best understood while still in their original use. Further research into, and recording of, this building type and associated landscapes is necessary and urgent.







Convents are (or were) ubiquitous, often dominating towns and villages. They were such a common feature of the landscape that they became almost invisible, and it is only now, as they are disappearing, that their significance is beginning to be recognised.

Convents formed the backbone of Irish Catholic society from the late-eighteenth century until well into the twentieth century. In 1800 there were 120 nuns living in 19 convents. A century later 368 convents were home to over 8,000 women religious and the 1961 census recorded 13,259 nuns in the Republic of Ireland. Nuns were influential figures in their communities, through their association with religion, education and healthcare, and joining religious orders was a popular life choice for thousands of women. Female religious orders were also significant as employers – of teachers and healthcare staff, of staff in the convents and of those who provided goods and services to the convents.

Women commissioned and re-appropriated many important buildings and landscapes, creating sites of architectural and cultural significance. And yet, even though the impact of the convent on Irish architecture, garden design and urban design is substantial, it is almost completely undocumented. It is imperative that the history of the buildings and landscapes, their material culture and the lives of the women who lived in the convents are recorded before it is too late. Alongside the individual stories that can be told there is also valuable generational memory of stories passed down through the decades and centuries which can be captured through oral histories. This report offers suggestions of ways in which convents and their landscapes can be recorded systematically.

Part I - Place and Space

Convents Still in Use

Substantial numbers of convents that are still in use in Ireland will close over the next few years. It is vital that these buildings are recorded before the residents and contents are dispersed and the building demolished or repurposed.

Many of the convents in Ireland are of simple architectural design but all are of significance for a variety of social and historical reasons. Their location in a village, town or city had a huge impact on the surrounding area as schools, housing and service industries grew up around them.

The fixtures and fittings of convents – from the holy water fonts to the stained glass windows to the convent bell – all form part of a rich material culture which offers insights, not only into the convent, but also into the work of the skilled craftsmen and women who created them.





Landscape

The external spaces associated with a convent have often been overlooked. These spaces had significant recreational and practical uses. The convent gardens played a vital role in the life of those in the convent (particularly before Vatican II, when most nuns lived a very enclosed life). Beyond the gardens, convents often also had a managed landscape – farmland or a smallholding.

The design and development of convent gardens is significant. These gardens had a variety of uses which altered over time. They were used for recreation, for education, to provide fruit and vegetables for the convents and flowers for the altar. In many cases a section of the garden was set aside for use as a burial ground and this requires consideration in the context of any redevelopment. Land associated with convents was often farmed by, or on behalf of, the sisters. Agricultural or recreational land frequently became the site of schools or sports fields. Considerable change occurred in the management and use of convent land pre- and post-Vatican II and this is particularly evident with orders that were not cloistered.





Material Culture

The material culture of convents has been neglected, particularly the elements that are utilitarian. Those studies that have been completed have primarily focussed on the fixtures and fittings in chapels, but even those studies are partial.

In recording material culture there needs to be an awareness that different orders prioritised different things. It is also important to note that some objects in the convent may only have been used when there were guests. Indeed, some of the more valuable objects may have arrived there as gifts or donations and only have been used for special occasions or simply put on display; for example silver soup tureens or china tea sets. The everyday items which were used by the sisters are much less likely to have survived as they were worn out and replaced over time. Convents often have household or decorative objects that were brought back from missions abroad and their significance in relation to the circulation of religious goods is worth noting.

Despite the simplicity of the buildings, particularly those built in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, many of the convents contained very beautiful internal finishes, in the halls and corridors and most notably within the chapels. Where the convents are still in use, these features have often been preserved. As a rule, convent buildings are meticulously maintained and therefore many of the historic internal finishes have survived in excellent condition. As well as architectural details, the surviving interior items include stained glass, plasterwork, archival material and light fittings.





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|------------------|--|---|----|----|---|
| June | Six pieces of Serge & Stuff | 8 | 15 | 7 | |
| . | Ten doz ⁿ pocket handkerchiefs | 2 | 0 | 0 | |
| . | Stockings | 0 | 11 | 6 | |
| . | Tapes, Thread, Worsted & Silk | 0 | 4 | 6 | |
| Aug ^t | Linen | 2 | 10 | 0 | |
| . | Calico 3/7 ^d Thread, Silk, pieces 6 ⁿ 2 1/2 ^d | 0 | 5 | 9 | |
| Oct ^r | Diaper & Rustian | 0 | 8 | 2 | |
| Nov ^r | Flannel 4/9 ^d Cotton, Tapes 6 ⁿ 3/3 ^d | 0 | 15 | 0 | |
| | | L | 18 | 10 | 6 |

1832

| | | | | |
|------------------|--|----|----|----|
| Jan ^r | Grey Linen | 2 | 0 | 9 |
| Feb ^r | Flannel | 0 | 6 | 3 |
| . | Stockings 2/8 ^d Thread, Tapes, Silk 6 ⁿ 3/2 ^d | 0 | 5 | 2 |
| March | Do | 2 | 17 | 0 |
| . | Do | 3 | 9 | 3 |
| . | Co | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| May | Co | 0 | 8 | 1 |
| July | Gr | 16 | 9 | 9 |
| . | a | 0 | 14 | 1 |
| . | Co | 0 | 15 | 7 |
| Oct ^r | Thr | 9 | 19 | 0 |
| . | St | 0 | 13 | 10 |
| . | Three pair Stays | 3 | 2 | 0 |

Convent Records

Every convent maintains records. Two of the most useful for researchers recording the buildings, landscapes and material culture are the convent annals and account books.

The account books shed light on how the buildings were used over time and provide information on much of the material culture of the convent. They also hold information on purchases relating to maintenance, development and repair of the property and gardens and frequently they name the suppliers of material to the convent.

The annals provide information about the life of the convent – often focussing on the admittance of novices, final professions, elections to offices and the death of Sisters. Alongside that, many annals often list significant purchases, developments or changes to the property and record gifts – often naming the donor and describing the gift.



Part II – Appraisal & Evaluation

Recording the Buildings

Preservation by Record

- This requires in-person visits to photograph and record the exterior and interior of the buildings. This should include non-permanent fixtures and fittings. A record should be taken of the current and previous uses of each room.
- Attention should be focused on the spaces that were integral to everyday life in the convent. These include the chapel, recreation room, refectory, parlours and cells.
- Oral histories should be recorded – including accounts of how the buildings and grounds were used alongside the personal stories of the sisters.
- Associated buildings including schools, sheds and outhouses should also be recorded.

Recording the Landscape

- Photograph the gardens and managed landscape, the cemeteries, the boundary walls and fences, the entrance. Where possible identify any buildings which are shown on historic Ordnance Survey maps.

Additional Source Material

- ❖ Annals
- ❖ Account books
- ❖ Maps
- ❖ Plans
- ❖ Historic photographs
- ❖ Engravings and inscriptions on objects, stained glass windows etc.
- ❖ Oral histories
- ❖ Newspapers
- ❖ Catholic directories

Ideally preservation, by record should take place while a convent is still operational. However, this may not be possible in all cases. Vacant convents should be recorded (ideally before the contents are removed). If the contents have been removed, then a record of the empty building should still take place before the building deteriorates or has the interior remodelled.





Assessing the Significance

Significance should be assessed using the eight categories of special interest that are used in the Record of Protected Structures. These categories (as outlined in the Planning and Development Act, 2000) are:

- Architectural
- Artistic
- Archaeological
- Cultural
- Social
- Historical
- Technical
- Scientific

Very clear information on evaluating architectural sites under these eight categories of special interest can be found here:

<https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/app/uploads/2021/06/NIAH-Handbook-Edition-March-2021.pdf>

Sources

General Sources for the Cultural Heritage of Convents

- Photographs
- Catholic directories
- Maps
- Account books
- Business and legal records of suppliers
- Annals
- Plans
- Theses
- Reports
- Secondary material
- Oral histories
- Engravings and inscriptions on buildings and/or objects
- Recruitment films for missionaries

Locating Relevant Material

- Archives of the Religious Orders
- Diocesan Archives
- County Archives
- Local Archives (often located in town libraries)
- National Library of Ireland – particularly its photographic collections
- Local History societies
- Crowd sourcing

Workshop

Organisers:

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Gillian O'Brien, Jessie Castle, Dara McGath, Presentation Sisters Congregational Archives

