

“SO MANY FOOLISH VIRGINS”: NUNS AND ANTI-CATHOLICISM FROM
MARIA MONK TO THE KNOW-NOTHINGS

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
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“SO MANY FOOLISH VIRGINS”: NUNS AND ANTI-CATHOLICISM FROM
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INTRODUCTION

MARIA MONK AND THE AMERICAN CAMPAIGN AGAINST CONVENTS

Women are ashamed to admit this, but Scripture and experience show that only one woman in thousands has the God-given gift to maintain pure chastity. Rather, a woman is not the master of herself. God fashioned her body so that she should be with a man, to have and to rear children.

–Martin Luther

*It remains to be seen...whether the pollutions which have defiled the convents of the old world, can exist amid the purity of our own moral atmosphere...on the soil consecrated as the home of freedom and the refuge of the oppressed. To us Americans, the inquiry is a deeply interesting one. –William McGavin, *The Protestant* (1833)*

On March 5, 1836 six women boarded the steamer *George Collier* in New Orleans and set off for St. Louis, Missouri. After traveling for three months across the Atlantic, during which the band of sisters faced illness and a violent storm, the Mississippi River would likely have appeared a welcomed and calm final passage. But the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet felt unwelcomed and afraid in this new terrain, so different from Lyon, France from where they came, where their neighbors knew them and held them in high esteem. They donned civilian clothing at the advice of the Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans with whom they stayed when they first arrived on American soil. The Ursulines warned of hecklers and worse if the women dared wear their habits in public, if they did not disguise themselves to fit in. The warnings of the superior before the trip, that the sisters in a sense would be exiles in this new land, likely echoed in the passengers' thoughts as their little steamer charged up the Mississippi.

Two weeks later, the sisters reached their destination. Even though they had been briefed on the poverty of the relatively new St. Louis diocese, the sisters likely felt ill-equipped for their new pioneer lifestyle in this distinctly Protestant land. Among them,

the oldest was thirty and the youngest twenty-one. Nevertheless, they quickly set about building their own cottage, learning English, and training to work with the deaf and mute, for which Bishop Joseph Rosati had requested their assistance. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet would go on to form the St. Joseph Institute for the Deaf, St. Joseph's Academy, and Fontbonne College (now Fontbonne University), but their early experience in America would be one marked by anti-convent propaganda, convent burnings, and repeated nativist calls for banning nuns in the land of the free.¹

When Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the All Saints Church door in Wittenberg, he initiated a sweeping revolution not only in Christian faith and practice but also in gender roles. Luther's theology rejected chastity and the nun's life as the ideal role for women, believing celibacy to be nearly impossible for both men and women. In its place Luther upheld the household, rather than the monastery, as the cornerstone of society. This represented a dramatic shift from one of the central expressions of Catholicism, especially for women. While the image of Mary had for centuries embodied virginal apostolic religiosity for Catholics, Luther's Protestantism and subsequent Reformation theology referred to Mary as the ideal wife and mother, an embodiment of domestic obedience. In Luther's mind, this exemplified both the true Christian role and liberation from a supposedly oppressive system. Yet he merely replaced one set of walls with another, and in the meantime removed the only vocational option other than marriage open to women at the time.²

¹ Sister Dolorita Maria Dougherty, C. S. J. et al., *Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1966), 51-102.

² Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1-2; see also Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary*

When England formally embraced the Protestant Reformation between 1532 and 1534, under decree of King Henry VIII, one of the biggest transformations related to monastic life. The new supreme head of church and state wasted little time before plundering the over 650 religious houses that dotted the landscape throughout England and Wales. As a result, many women religious, sometimes as an entire house, moved to the Continent. While the dissolution of the monasteries was likely more an effort to replenish the wealth of the nearly bankrupt exchequer than one rooted in theoretical opposition, the nun subsequently became a distinctly foreign and anti-Christian symbol in England, especially as Catholic France and Spain became hated enemies. These views migrated with British colonists to the New World, making their way deeply into British North America, only to be revived in full force in the wake of convent growth in the U.S. by the early nineteenth century.³

Antipathy toward and intrigue with nuns and convents made their way into some of the earliest novels. *The Monk* (1796) published in London by Matthew Lewis became an instant best-seller throughout England and Europe. A Gothic novel set in Spain, *The Monk* told of two young men who lost their female lovers to conniving clerics. After being confined against her will in a convent, Agnes dies at the hands of a tyrannical abess. In a desperate attempt to rescue Agnes, her lover Raymond steals away into the

in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Merry E. Wiesner, "Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys," in Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper, and Raphael Samuel, eds., *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics, and Patriarchy* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

³ For more on the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, see Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Last Divine Office: Henry VIII and the Dissolution of the Monasteries* (New York: BlueBridge, 2009); and Richard Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); for more on women religious migrating from England to the Continent, see Kathleen Cooke, "The English Nuns and the Dissolution" in John Blair and Brian Golding, eds. *The Cloister and the World: Essays in Medieval History in Honor of Barbara Harvey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1984), 4.

convent. Believing he has found her, Raymond lifts the veil of his perceived bride only to reveal the “Bleeding Nun,” a decrepit woman dead and punished for her sexual sins. Meanwhile Antonia leaves her beau after falling for a dissolute and ambitious priest, Ambrosio. Full of lust, violence, and even incest, the novel caught readers’ attention. In true Gothic form, it also delivered a gloomy medieval environment, complete with church cemeteries, subterranean passages, and vaulted convents. Gothic forms of literature operated in the vacuum left by Catholic belief and often included distinctly Protestant views of anti-clericalism. *The Monk*’s near obsessive focus on Catholic abuses of power, sexual repression, and transgression easily fit this model and would become a mainstay of later convent narratives throughout the nineteenth century.⁴

Other anti-Catholic works published in the eighteenth century prominently featured convents. Anthony Gavin, a former priest from Spain who immigrated to England and later Ireland before becoming an Anglican minister, published a scathing critique of Catholicism, the confessional, and convent life in *The Master-Key to Popery* (1724). The book went through a series of reprints in England before being translated into German, Dutch, and French. With a telling subtitle—*How Haunted Virgins have been disposed, And Devils were cast out to let in Priests*, the book promised to unlock “many errors” of Rome. It especially related the supposed faults of convents, including illicit relationships among priests and nuns, resulting pregnancies, and dangerous attempts to escape by nuns who faced the prospect of the Spanish Inquisition. Reflecting a narrow

⁴ Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk* (1796; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1952); for an analysis of *the Monk*, see Victoria Nelson, “Faux Catholic: A Gothic Subgenre from Monk Lewis to Dan Brown,” *Boundary 2* 34, no. 3 (2007): 87-107; for more on the role of Protestant anticlericalism in Gothic literature, see Robert F. Geary, *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction: Horror, Belief, and Literary Change* (Newiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992); and Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction and the Protestant Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1988). For an overview of medieval convent literature, see Graciela S. Daichman, *Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

view as to why women chose to pursue convent life, the book described them as being attracted to the superficialities of religious life rather than any deep personal convictions. *The Master-Key* was later republished in the U.S. as *The Great Red Dragon*, and enjoyed great popularity during the height of the so-called “Protestant Crusade,” being reissued three times between 1830 and 1860.⁵

The popularity of the *Great Red Dragon* coincided with the emergence of obsessive anti-Catholicism in America. Opposition to Catholics in America dated back to the colonial era but became more heightened in response to the flood of immigration in the nineteenth century and the establishment of Catholic Emancipation in England in 1829 that ended centuries of anti-Catholic penal codes. From 1800 to 1860 anti-Catholic publications flooded the literary market, with over 200 books, 25 newspapers, 41 histories, 40 works of fiction, 13 magazines, and a bevy of pamphlets, gift books, and almanacs. Newspapers with names like *Downfall of Babylon, or the Triumph of Truth Over Popery*, *The American Protestant Vindicator*, *The Anti-Romanist*, and *Priestcraft Unmasked* offered weekly and monthly tirades against Rome. Religious societies devoted to promoting Protestantism and combatting Catholicism also sprang up in the U.S., including the American Protestant Association, the Home Missionary Society, the Protestant Reformation Society, and the American Tract Society. The New York Protestant Association declared its sole objection to be the promotion of “the

⁵ Antonio Gavin, *The Master-Key to Popery* (Dublin, 1724; repr., London: J. Walthoe, 1725); Gavin, *The Great Red Dragon, or, The Master-Key to Popery* (New York: H. Dayton, 1860); Joan R. Gundersen, “Anthony Gavin’s ‘A Master-Key to Popery’: A Virginia Parson’s Best Seller,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 82 (January 1974): 39-46; Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 106.

Reformation by public discussions which shall illustrate the history and character of Popery.” Its first meeting addressed the topic: “Is Popery that Babylon the Great?”⁶

Anti-Catholics and nativists—hyper-patriotic Americans determined to keep out “foreign influence”—combined forces, forming fraternal organizations in the 1840s under such names as the United Sons of America, the Sons of the Sires, and the Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. By the following decade these fraternal orders merged into the American or Know Nothing Party which swept American politics in 1854-1856. For these groups, convents represented the pinnacle of Catholic dangers. Described as an empire within an empire, convents appeared as mini enclaves of Popish despotism, set off from the arm of the law. “It was against this dangerous power, this *imperium in imperio*,” declared a Know Nothing gift book, “that the American party has assumed an attitude, not offensive, but defensive.”⁷

For most U.S. citizens, Catholicism represented all things un-American. As Ralph Gabriel argues, “What the capitalist was to Lenin in 1917 and the Jew to Hitler in 1935, the Catholic was to the American democrat in the middle of the nineteenth century.” The “American democrat” to which Gabriel referred had little to do with specific American political parties. A distinctly American ideology of Lockean liberalism transcended partisanship. Defined as a commitment to limited government, personal freedoms, private property, and the free market, Lockean or classical liberalism penetrated various political

⁶ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 106; Ray Allen Billington, “Tentative Bibliography of Anti-Catholic Propaganda in the United States (1800-1860),” *The Catholic Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (January 1933): 492-513; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (1938; repr., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1952), 54-63;

⁷ Details regarding the New York Protestant Association were printed in *The Protestant* (January 15, 1831) and *The Protestant* (February 18, 1832); Frederick Rinehart Anspach, *The Sons of the Sires: A History of the Rise, Progress, and Destiny of the American Party, And Its Probable Influence on the Next Election* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1855); for more on nativist fraternal orders and the Know Nothing Party, see David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, revised and updated (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), chapters 3-9.

parties of the early republic and antebellum era, both “conservative” and “liberal.” Catholicism, at least symbolically, ascribed to an earlier conservatism, consisting of concentrated power in the religious hierarchy, especially the pope, and a collective more than individualistic approach to life. Under such auspices, Catholicism appeared un-American, Old World, and anti-modern. Many anti-Catholics recognized fundamental differences between Rome and Columbia and predicted a clash of two worlds. Yet sober recognitions of political and theoretical differences easily ignited more xenophobic, intolerant, and bigoted concerns.⁸

In the 1830s, immigration to the U.S. increased dramatically. In 1832 sixty-thousand immigrants arrived in America, and just about as many continued to flow in each year during that decade. Between 1840 and 1844, even before the Irish potato famine, the number of newcomers reached nearly a quarter of a million. In 1847 numbers spiked to 234,000 and reached 380,000 in 1851. Figures continued at this unprecedented rate until 1854. Most of the 2.75 million newcomers who reached American shores in this seven year period were practicing Roman Catholics. Germans made up a large percentage and Irish even more, with a quarter million Irish men and women arriving in 1851 alone. Beginning as a small minority, Catholics counted only 70,000 in America in 1807. By 1840, church membership swelled to 660,000. Numbers reached 3.1 million in 1860, making Catholicism the single largest religious group in the nation. In thus a short period of time, Anglo-Americans witnessed a dramatic change in their environment, both ethnic

⁸ Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* 3rd ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 54.

and religious, a change that would make the populace susceptible to conspiracy theories against the U.S.⁹

As the Catholic presence grew, nuns especially stood out. Their distinct dress or habit, their unmarried state, and their self-supporting, communal lifestyle independent from the traditional household, rendered them directly opposed to domestic civic relationships, middle-class companionate marriage, and Protestant feminine ideals. As Emily Clark puts it in her study of the New Orleans' Ursulines, "the nun was an ideological outlaw." She stood in stark contrast to Protestant-American constructions of femininity. While Revolutionary rhetoric praised what historians now refer to as "republican motherhood" as the bedrock of virtue and civilization in the new nation, nuns appeared superfluous if not outright threatening. One anti-Catholic newspaper from the time contended that "an institution which prevents women from fulfilling those duties as wives and mothers, which God has appointed... should not be permitted to exist for one moment in any civilized land." That many orders of nuns springing up in nineteenth century America came from Catholic Europe only contributed to the view of convents as foreign and un-American. Representing religious, gender, and ethnic fears, the nun became one of the greatest targets of anti-Catholic hostility.¹⁰

During the colonial era, British colonists had prohibited religious communities from founding convents. Prior to the nineteenth century, the new nation housed only two

⁹ Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 62; *The Statistical History of the United States* (Stamford, Conn.: Fairfield Publishers, 1865), ser. C88-114, p. 57; see also Arnold Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration, 1850-1900* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), 151; D. B. Debow, *Statistical View of the United States: Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Printer, 1854), 119; and Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 101-110

¹⁰ Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4-5; for more on republican motherhood, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); William Brownlee, "Nunneries are Unconstitutional," *Protestant Vindicator* 2, no. 40 (New York: July 6, 1836).

convents, the Carmelites and the Poor Clares, both in Maryland, a former Catholic stronghold. Soon after the Ursulines of New Orleans entered the nation through the Louisiana Purchase, the number of orders of women religious shot up. Between 1803 and 1830 Catholic women founded ten female orders. Indigenous orders constituted five of these, including the American Sisters of Charity founded by Elizabeth Anne Seton in 1809. New orders assumed the French model of the Ursulines, taking up active apostolates such as teaching, nursing, and running orphanages and other charitable institutions. By 1845 Catholic women religious¹¹ resided in the nation's North and South, in major cities and agricultural hubs. Beginning in 1812, the Sisters of Loretto and the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth served in the remote frontier area of Bardstown, Kentucky. The Mississippi Valley housed the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet along with a number of other orders. While the Sisters of Charity and Sisters of Mercy made homes in the urban North. The number of orders rose to thirty-one by 1850 with 1,941 sisters.¹²

While these numbers marked a change from the past, they were not spectacular. They certainly did not match the tenor of alarm raised by nativists. Anti-Catholic presses pointed to the increased number of convents as evidenced of the growing "disease" of Romanism in America. Before urging America to "wake up!," *Downfall of Babylon* announced the arrival of three priests and two nuns in St. Louis along with their plans to establish another Ursuline convent in America. Nativist pamphlets and books also

¹¹ "Women religious" is a term used to describe female monastics. Here "religious" is not an adjective, but a noun.

¹² George C. Stewart Jr., "Women Religious in America, Demographic Overview," in Michael Glazier and Thomas J. Shelley, eds., *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 1496 – 1497; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 261-2; Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America*, 32, 45, 61, 64; see also Barbara Misner, *Highly Respectable and Accomplished Ladies: Catholic Women Religious in America, 1790-1850* (New York: Garland, 1988), 203-4; and "Women in the Convent," in Karen Kennelly, ed., *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 17-47.

produced updated lists of the number of convents in the U.S. as a clear sign of “Papist” invasion into the land of the free. Anti-Catholic literature repeatedly referred to convents as a pollution that served to defile the virtue of women and the nation alike. Such a poison, they intoned, should not be permitted to exist in the U.S. So sure were nativists of the secret vices that existed in convents, that by 1855, the Massachusetts legislator, run by a majority of Know Nothings, sponsored a “Nunnery Committee” to investigate what they referred to as “priests’ prisons for women,” despite their being only a few convents in the state at the time.¹³

Convent narratives, by far the most popular form of anti-Catholic literature, reflected deep suspicion of and fascination with nuns. Borrowing from *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis and Anthony Gavin’s *Great Red Dragon*, convent narratives published in the U.S. depicted villainous, profligate, lust-driven priests, vulnerable, naïve, trapped nuns, illicit affairs, torturous penances, murder, infanticide, brave escape stories, romance, adventure, and horror. Of the twenty-two convent narratives published between 1830 and 1860, none was more popular or influential than *The Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836) by Maria Monk. After “escaping” from the Hotel Dieu (a French convent literally meaning “hostel” or hospital “of God”), in Montreal, Monk published an exposé of her experience there. The nun’s chief duty, she explained, consisted in ignoring her conscience and living in “criminal intercourse” with the priests. She graphically depicted nuns performing infanticide against their illegitimate offspring.

¹³ *Downfall of Babylon* (July 4, 1835); “The 100 Popish Ecclesiastics who Arrived in N. York in the Year 1834,” *Downfall of Babylon* 1, no. 24 (April 25, 1835); updated lists of convent growth around the world found in E. Hutchinson, *Startling Facts for Native Americans Called “Know Nothings”* (New York: American Family Publishing, 1855), 62-3; “Nunneries,” *Christian Watchman and Reflector* (Boston, September 14, 1854). At the time of the “Nunnery Committee” formation, only two orders existed in Massachusetts: the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Notre Dame. See Karen M. Kennelly, “Women Religious in America,” in Glazer et al., eds. *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*, 1496.

After a hasty baptism, nuns tossed their murdered infants into a giant pit covered with lime in the convent's cellar floor. Nuns of the Hotel Dieu faced excruciating penances, claimed Monk, including chewing on glass and being branded with hot irons for the slightest offense. Monk attested to witnessing the murder of two nuns during her time in the convent.¹⁴

These “disclosures” gripped readers who purchased 300,000 copies of *Awful Disclosures* by 1860. The allegations in the book also contributed to a series of investigations of the Hotel Dieu and a veritable press war between supporters and critics of Monk. Despite investigations revealing that Monk had never resided in the Hotel Dieu as a nun or novice, her work continued to enjoy great success and influence throughout the following two centuries and has never gone out of print.¹⁵

The popularity of anti-Catholic literature, especially convent narratives, reflected concern over the changing demographic in the U.S., anxiety over challenges to dominant gender roles, and a desire to define what it meant to be a real American. Susan Griffin described anti-Catholic literature as an attempt on the part of its authors to define, defend, and criticize Protestant America. In convent narratives, the “good guys” embodied the American ideal. White, male Protestants, full of patriotism, self-sacrifice, commonsense, and bravery stood in stark contrast to foreign, opportunist priests enslaved to their own

¹⁴ For a list of convent narratives, see Billington, “Tentative Bibliography of Anti-Catholic Propaganda in the United States (1800-1860).”

¹⁵ Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk: as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal* (New York: Howe & Bates, 1836). Subsequent editions changed the title to *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*. For more on Maria Monk and the controversy surrounding the publication of her book, see Ray Allen Billington, “Maria Monk and Her Influence,” *Catholic Historical Review* 22, no. 3 (October 1936): 283-296; Nancy Lusignan Schultz, “Introduction,” in *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales: Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk* (West Lafayette, Ind.: NotaBell Books, 1999); and Ralph Thompson, “The Maria Monk Affair,” *The Colophon* 17, no. 6 (1934).

passions and delusions. Female characters likewise symbolized opposing roles for women. While nuns appeared to live a gloomy, solitary, and jaded existence in which they wasted their days, the ideal women—the Protestant wife and mother—appeared active, happy, social, loving, and pious. More than ethnic or even religious elements, these gendered concerns appeared paramount in the convent narratives, reflecting a strong reactionary posture against nuns for their inversion of gender norms in early America.¹⁶

Following the Revolution Americans upheld the moral virtue of women in the context of the home as an essential component of the survival and health of the nation. As good wives and mothers, who domesticated the passions of men and educated sons in morality and republican ideology, women provided behind-the-scenes national strength. The so-called first and second Great Awakening offered Puritan and evangelical women more ministering opportunities, and the Revolutionary era introduced a brief flexibility of gender roles as revolutionaries reimagined their society. But the Early Republic and antebellum era witnessed a growing divide between male and female roles in society with the resulting increase of restrictions for women. While historians today debate the idea of “separate spheres,” the notion of a “female sphere” permeated nineteenth century American rhetoric. With the rise of urbanization, the home or “private sphere” emerged as a safe haven of morality and companionship as opposed to the competitive, immoral and cold city. Women’s association with the home contributed to the growing view of them as possessing moral superiority over men. This view in turn operated to justify the

¹⁶ Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7. For one example of contrasting gender ideals in convent narratives, see L. Larned, *The American Nun; or, The Effects of Romance* (Boston: Otis, Broaders, 1836). Other examples are detailed in the following chapters.

notion that women's natural and highest role was tied to the hearth as wife and mother. Older Reformation notions of the role of women naturally reinforced these ideas. Female association with the home became so entrenched as to birth a distinct trinity of feminine ideals defined by piety, purity, and submissiveness. While nuns could easily fit these standards, their separation of these virtues from the home rendered them subversive.¹⁷

Hostility toward nuns and convent life erupted on the night of August 11, 1834 when a Protestant mob in Charlestown, Massachusetts raided and torched an Ursuline convent. The Ursuline nuns ran Mount Benedict, a boarding academy for girls. On twenty-four acres of cultivated farm land, the imposing three-story red brick building undeniably testified to the Catholic presence in America. Months before the burning, rumors circulated around Charlestown and neighboring towns of women being held against their will at Mount Benedict. A disgruntled former novice's stories of the Ursuline community's supposed plan to build another convent on Bunker Hill and spirit away defiant nuns to Canada, heightened suspicions of the sisters. Famed New England revivalist, Lyman Beecher raised tensions yet further through a series of incendiary sermons lamenting the growth of Catholicism and chastising the city's "reckless Protestant parents" for sending their daughters to be educated by nuns. Finally taking action, a group of men dressed as Indians and invigorated by alcohol, stormed into the convent with flaming torches in hand. Almost seven hours later they had caused \$50,000

¹⁷ For more on gender during the first and second Great Awakening, see Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). For a historiography on the concept of "separate spheres," see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39; Carol Lasser, "Beyond Separate Spheres: The Power of Public Opinion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 115-123; and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

in damages that were never repaid. The burning of Mount Benedict testified to the growing influence of anti-convent propaganda and reflected the way in which outraged citizens often dealt with their frustrations in the Jacksonian era, through vigilante violence.¹⁸

While most prominent citizens denounced the burning of Mount Benedict as a “base and cowardly act,” they devoured the sensational and incriminating story of convent life by Maria Monk published two years later along with a bevy of other convent narratives. A series of convent tales enjoyed best-seller status in the decades leading up to the Civil War. The convent narrative prototype, *Lorette, the History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun: Exhibiting the Interior of Female Convents* appeared in 1832. It detailed captivity, incest, and priestly intrigue. Shortly after its appearance, *Lorette* made best-seller lists next to works by Catherine Sedgwick and Susan Warner. Three years later, *Six Months in a Convent* by Rebecca Reed, a former novice of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, sold 10,000 within its first few weeks. After a month, the exposé sold over 200,000 copies. But it was Maria Monk’s book that inspired a full wave

¹⁸ The “disgruntled novice” was Rebecca Reed and her convent exposé, *Six Months in a Convent, or; the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed, who was under the influence of the Roman Catholics about two years and an inmate of the Ursuline Convent on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Mass., nearly six months, in the years 1831 – 2*, (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Metcalf, 1835), launched various accusations against the Ursuline community. A transcript of Lyman Beecher’s sermons in New England may be found in Lyman Beecher, D. D., *Plea for the West* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, & Co., 1835); for histories of the burning of the Ursuline convent, see George Hill Evans, *The Burning of the Mount Benedict Ursuline Community House*, Somerville Historical Monographs (Somerville, Mass.: Somerville Public Library, 1934); Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, 135-145; Ray Allen Billington, “The Burning of the Charlestown Convent,” *The New England Quarterly* 10 (March 1937): 4-24; Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, 3 vols. (New York: Pilot Publishing Co., 1944), 205-39; Jeanne Hamilton, “The Nunnery as Menace: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 35-65; Daniel A. Cohen, “Passing the Torch: Boston Firemen, ‘Tea Party’ Patriots, and the Burning of the Charlestown Convent Riot,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (2004): 528-586; and Louisa Goddard Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent. A Narrative of the Destruction by a Mob, of the Ursuline School on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, as Remembered by One of the Pupils* (Cambridge: Welch, Bigelow, and Company, 1877).

of convent narratives over the next two decades. *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* (1845), a cautionary tale against sending young women to be educated in convent schools, went through ten editions in its first year. *The Escaped Nun* (1855) by Josephine Bunkley—hailed a second Maria Monk—became an instant best-seller. *The Convent's Doom* (1854), a fictional and romantic rendering of the burning of the Charlestown convent by well-known novelist, Charles Frothingham, sold 40,000 copies in its first week of publication and went through five editions that year. Each convent tale promised to be more shocking and detailed than the previous ones, and the reading public could not get enough.¹⁹

By the following decade, anti-convent sentiment had become more mainstream. While convent narratives of the 1830s focused on brave escaped nuns, sex, and sadism, those of the 1840s often centered on convent schools, religious training of children, and influence of Catholicism through education. These less salacious topics marked the way in which anti-convent propaganda became more respectable. To be sure, tawdry convent tales continued to sell, but narratives that focused on children and convent education extended the audience for such works to the middle to upper classes. Works such as *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery*, detailing the duplicitous ways nuns supposedly warped the minds of young girls in convent schools, contributed to the common school

¹⁹ “Report,” in *Documents Relating to the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown* (Boston: S. N. Dickinson, 1842), 1; George Bourne, *Lorette: The History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun* (New York: William A. Mercin, 1833); for details on *Lorette's* popularity, see Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 318; for details on the popularity of *Six Months*, see Susan M. Griffin's *Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 30; Mary Anne Ursula Moffatt's *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent, Exposing Its Falsehoods and Absurdities* (Boston: J. H. Eastburn, 1835), iii, vii; Rachel McCrindell, *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Hooker, 1846); Rachel McCrindell, *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery, or The Snares of Popery: A Warning to Protestants Against Education in Catholic Seminaries* 10th ed. (New York: Wellman, 1846); Josephine M. Bunkley, *The Testimony of an Escaped Novice from the Sisterhood of St. Joseph* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855); Charles W. Frothingham, *The Convent's Doom: A Story of Charlestown in 1834* (Boston: Graves and Weston, 1854); for sales figures, see Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 345.

movement and the so-called “Bible Wars.” Fear of convent education in part inspired reformers to make free education available for the nation’s youth. Reformers insisted on using the King James Bible, a version Catholics opposed. Convinced by anti-Catholic propaganda that Catholics disparaged the Bible altogether, Protestant reformers interpreted Catholic opposition as evidence of a larger plot to infiltrate the nation through its youth. The Bible Wars became so heated between Catholics and Protestants, especially in New York and Philadelphia, that they boiled over into a full-fledged riot in Philadelphia in 1844 between the city’s native citizens and the Irish that cost twenty-four lives. While economic and social tensions were certainly factors in the riots, it was no coincidence that they erupted during a discussion about the Bible in schools by a group of Philadelphia nativists or that during the riots nativists targeted a Sisters of Charity convent to burn.²⁰

A few aspects of convent life that particularly troubled non-Catholics were the supposed enclosure and secrecy of convents—something more assumed than actual. These elements allowed ample room for speculation as authors imagined what took place behind closed doors in convents and convent schools. Mandated enclosures of nuns dated back to the 1566 papal bull *Circa Pastoralis* in which Pius V compelled all nuns who took solemn vows to live strictly within the walls of the convent. Adjacent churches and schools to the convent ensured that sisters did not wander beyond convent grounds.

While communities of nuns carried over such traditions initially when they established

²⁰ McCrindell, *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery*. For more on the “Bible Wars,” see Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York School Controversy* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968); James Pyle Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania, Private and Public, Elementary and Higher* (Lancaster, PA: Inquirer Publishing Co., 1886); and Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America: Religious Conflict in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2013), chapter 3; for more on the Philadelphia Riots, see Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study in Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975).

orders in the United States, they soon found that greater flexibility would be more advantageous to their circumstances in America. Without hefty dowries, more nuns than before turned to teaching, nursing, and providing charitable houses for the poor and orphans. Stringent practices of enclosures and asceticism were simply inimical to the demands of their new environment. Thus, during the 1840s and 1850s “simple vows,” which allowed women to act outside the convent, became the norm throughout religious orders in the U.S. Most religious constitutions also severely restricted sisters’ communication with outside friends and family. Despite the intention of the practice to foster a communal identity among the sisters and to “strip away” worldly associations, outsiders were suspicious. If relatives and friends had no access to their associate nun, how could they be sure she was safe? Yet many American orders often practiced more flexible rules than their European counter-parts as they adjusted to the American milieu. And anyone under the care of nuns, as patients or students, could certainly see visitors whenever they wished.²¹

The women who came to America to live as nuns faced a number of challenges. They squabbled with male clerics over control of their orders, which resulted for some in their dissolution. Many of them left familiar lands in Europe without knowing English. Once they arrived in America, they also faced poverty, hunger, inadequate shelter, cold winters and hostile nativists. They faced cholera and yellow fever epidemics. Between 1820 and 1860 American nuns opened twenty-five hospitals during which time many sisters lost their lives. Perhaps nativism posed the biggest challenge in establishing

²¹ James J. Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 44-5; see also Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America*, 88, 105-136. The constitutions of many communities, including the Ursulines, allowed for flexibility depending on the changing circumstances and needs of the sisters. This allowed communities to adapt to the American milieu, but any permanent changes in constitutions required permission of bishops and at times Rome.

religious communities in the U.S. Like many sisters traveling from Europe, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet disguised themselves on their river journey to St. Louis so as not to attract the negative attention of nativists. Sisters faced allegations repeated in convent narratives, the burning of the homes, riots, unwarranted investigations, and an environment of constant suspicion.²²

The real life of sisters hardly matched that portrayed in convent narratives, which not only reinforced a host of nativist and anti-Catholic assumptions but also incorporated an array of literary motifs. Convent narratives drew heavily on the previously established distinctly American literary genre of the captivity narrative. In convent narratives, the cloister replaced the wilderness as a dangerous, maze-like realm cut off from civilization. Murderous, lascivious, and money-hungry priests played the role of “savages.” And vulnerable, imprisoned nuns paralleled white Christian female victims of Indian captivity. Some even referenced the “wilderness” and Indians. Like Indian captivity narratives, such as *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682) by Mary Rowlandson, convent narratives also made frequent references to the Bible, often presented as a source of refuge for female captives. While readers did not all likely make the connection between these two genres, their familiarity with captivity narratives made them more susceptible to convent narrative arguments, as they were conditioned to recognize the storyline of innocent women captured by villains.²³

²² Dougherty, C. S. J. et al., *Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet*, 56; Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women*, 51-2. In the antebellum era, two convents were burned, the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown and the Sisters of Charity house in Philadelphia, while a riot broke out in front of the Carmelite convent in Baltimore.

²³ One convent narrative that made distinct references to Indian captivity narratives, was George Bourne’s *Lorette: The History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun* (1833); Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, edited with an Introduction by Neal Salisbury (1682, repr.: Boston: Bedford Books, 1997). For more on the association between convent and captivity narratives, see Rebecca Sullivan, “A Wayward from the Wilderness: Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* and the Feminization of

Convent narratives incorporated many other popular literary elements, including romance, sentimentalism, sensationalism, and the Gothic. Some novelists even took to writing tales about nuns because the “mystery” surrounding convents was “a good theme for the writer of fiction.” Convent narratives also helped inspire a highly popular genre of the 1840s and 1850s known as city mysteries. City mysteries, such as George Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* (1850) and George Lippard’s *Quaker City* (1845), began appearing with the rise of urbanization. Contrary to city lithographs and travel guides that hailed industrial growth, city mysteries unveiled a vice-ridden underworld beneath a shimmering surface. Convent narratives—appearing a full decade before the first city mysteries—also described veiled corruption and the threat that a hidden realm posed toward innocent youth. Both convent narratives and city mysteries referred to vice as something foreign. Mostly set in Catholic countries, like Spain or France, and in an earlier time, convent narratives alluded to the foreign nature of Catholicism and women religious. City mysteries likewise, described Irish saloon keepers and alluded to the “Orient” in depicting the debauchery and decadence of city haunts. By the 1840s and 1850s, nativists employed both genres to predict impending doom against the nation if foreign ways and people were not eradicated and the country restored to its alleged previous virtue.²⁴

Lower Canada in the Nineteenth Century,” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Issue 62 (Fall 1997): 212-3; for an analysis of the archetypal pattern of captivity narratives, see Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and James Arthur Levernier, *The Indian Captivity Narrative, 1550-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), chapter 2.

²⁴ Quote from the preface of Harry Hazel’s *The Nun of St. Ursula, or, the Burning of a Convent: A Romance of Mt. Benedict* (Boston: Gleason, 1845). George Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (New York: N. Orr, 1850); George Lippard, *The Quaker City: or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1845); see also Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849). For a useful analysis of the significance of city mysteries in nineteenth century, urban America, see Elizabeth Kelly

By the 1850s, opposition to convents had become so entrenched in American life as to become formally politicized. Know Nothing politicians, from Massachusetts to Maryland, rallied all true Americans against foreign influence, “Romanism,” and corruption and called for, among other measures, nunnery investigations and convent bans. Legislators narrowly defeated a proposal to form a nunnery committee in Maryland, where Know Nothings held congressional majority in 1855. In Massachusetts, however, where the Ursuline convent burned down twenty years before, Know Nothing legislators established a Nunnery Committee with wide support of their constituents and no opposition among the representatives. Without notice or incriminating evidence, a band of Know Nothings along with a dozen of their friends descended on the Notre Dame Academy in Roxbury, run by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and a Catholic school in Lowell operated by the Notre Dame Sisters. They searched closets and bed chambers, overturned chairs and tables, and asked the sisters offensive questions, before convening for a sumptuous meal and night of carousing at a nearby hotel. While some citizens condemned the nunnery sleuths for violating the constitutional rights of the sisters to be secure in their “homes” against unwarranted searches, an investigative committee later only charged the men with indecent actions at their after party.²⁵

Gray, “The World by Gaslight: Urban-gothic Literature and Moral Reform in New York City, 1845-1860,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 2 (June 2009): 137-161.

²⁵ For more on Know Nothings in Maryland, see Jean H. Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1977). Little has been written about the Massachusetts Nunnery Committee, but there is one useful article. See John R. Mulkern, “Scandal Behind Convent Walls: The Know-Nothing Nunnery Committee of 1855,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 11, issue 1 (1983): 22-34; see also Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 413-7. The most vocal critic of the Nunnery Committee for violating the civil liberties of nuns was Charles Hale who published “‘Our Houses are Our Castles’: A Review of the Proceedings of the Nunnery Committee, of the Massachusetts Legislator; and Especially their Conduct and that of their Associates on the Occasion of the Visit to the Catholic School in Roxbury, March 26, 1855,” (Boston: Published at the Office of the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, 1855).

The Nunnery Committee served to discredit the Know Nothings, at least in Massachusetts, where they never secured another majority. At the same time, the formation of the committee shows just how deeply ingrained convent prejudice was in America during the 1850s. The formation of the committee passed without a vote of dissent, and later trials against the committee only found fault with indulgences enjoyed by the committee after their search. Had the convent investigators turned up any incriminating evidence from their searches, the legacy of the Nunnery Committee would have likely been quite different. Despite the centrality of convent opposition among Know Nothings and the debacle of the Nunnery Committee, historians have paid scant attention to the event, seeing the Nunnery Committee as a strange aberration from the main goals and actions of the Know Nothings. Yet the Nunnery Committee represents a high point in the American campaign against convents, a time where convent opposition became formally politicized and where legislators officially endorsed the violation of civil liberties of nuns.²⁶

One way Know Nothings riled up their constituents against convents on the eve of the Civil War was by casting the life of the nun as “white slavery.” As “slaves to the priests’ desires,” nuns were “bona fide property of the convent,” argued one author. Another recoiled at the “injustice” that abolitionist fought to emancipate the black slave, while “free-born white women, the daughters of America,” suffered in convents. Yet not all nuns were white or had an Anglo or European background. As early as 1829 émigrés

²⁶ John Mulkern described the Nunnery Committee as a “bitter fruit” of the one-party system in his *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People’s Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 180. Other historians writing on the Know Nothing legislator in Massachusetts only devote minimal attention to the Nunnery Committee, such as Dale Knobel who devotes less than a paragraph to the topic in *“America for Americans”: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 122.

from San Domingo established the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore as the first black Catholic religious order in America. The Oblate Sisters provided education for slaves and among the twelve nuns at least three of them had been slaves. The sisters faced hostility from nativists and a general lack of support from the church, yet managed to survive by taking in washing and mending and serving as domestics in the seminary. In 1842 Marie J. Aliquot established the second black congregation in New Orleans. The community offered education to black girls, both free and enslaved and opened orphanages and academies.²⁷

There were few integrated convent communities, however. Before the Civil War only one short-lived effort to create an integrated sisterhood existed, and some orders, including the Sisters of Loretto in Kentucky, kept slaves. The most successful interracial endeavors came immediately after the Civil War, especially with Mary Katherine Drexel's establishment of the "Sisters of Blessed Sacrament for Indian and Colored People." But the outcry against convent life as "white slavery" served to sustain the American campaign against convents, at least for a time.²⁸

While many convent narratives described nuns as unwitting, vulnerable victims, the nun as villain also appeared. Convent critics at least expressly acted on behalf of women, in an effort to "save" them from the alleged harsh and corrupt life of the cloister. But nuns, especially mother superiors and abbesses, appeared in anti-convent literature as masculine masterminds who were just as much predator as prey. One anti-Catholic paper

²⁷ Andrew Cross, *Priests' Prisons for Women* (Baltimore: Sherwood, 1854). For more on the racial make-up of nineteenth century convents in America, see Kenneally, 54-5; and Diane Batts Morrow, *People of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁸ Kenneally, 54-5; Karen M. Kennelly, "Women Religious in America: Pioneer Beginnings, 1723-1850," in Glazier et al., eds. *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*, 1491.

condemned all convent inmates as “lazy, illiterate, licentious epicures.” Superiors worked alongside priests, luring naïve young women into religious orders. They colluded with clerics in murder, oversaw infanticide, and inflicted severe penances. Like a slave overseer, mother superiors carried out the priests’ commands. Nuns also appeared as cunning spies, such as the “Jesuitess” in one novel who spies on a Protestant family before convincing their daughter to become a nun. Each extreme female role in convent narratives reflected gender concerns. The female victim appeared in need of male control for safety and domesticity for happiness, while the domineering mother superior represented a repellent inverse of feminine ideals. In both cases, convent narratives served to condemn the single sisterhood and uphold dominant gender norms.²⁹

Far from a niche occurrence in the history of U.S. anti-Catholicism and nativism, the American campaign against nuns and convent life encompassed working-class and elite citizens, high and low brow literature, vigilant violence, and respectable politics. Those involved in the American campaign against convents were also connected to various reform movements of the era, including anti-slavery, temperance, Protestant reform movements, printing, and nativism. George Bourne, who wrote the first convent narrative in the U.S. and was one of Maria Monk’s “Protestant protectors,” also worked as an avid abolitionist. He wrote *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* (1816), a work that William Lloyd Garrison cited as being most influential in his efforts to end slavery. James and John Harper, known professionally as the Harper Brothers, who had a hand in publishing both *Awful Disclosures* (1836) and *The Escaped Nun* (1855), helped create one of the biggest printing ventures in the U.S. and were active in the nativist movement.

²⁹ *Protestant Vindicator* (July 6, 1836); Jemima Luke, *The Female Jesuit; or, The Spy in the Family* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1851).

Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph and noted artist, penned two incendiary works alleging a Catholic conspiracy against the U.S. He also supported Maria Monk and even courted her for a time, allegedly considering proposing marriage. Andrew Cross, author of *Priests' Prisons for Women* was a prominent nativist. William Brownlee, editor of *Protestant Vindicator* and fierce defender of Maria Monk, served as president of the Protestant Reformation Society. These characters reveal the significance of the American campaign against convents and its association with wider historical trends at the time.³⁰

While the campaign against nuns and convent life says much about nineteenth century American attitudes toward Catholicism and a range of cultural issues and ideas, it was certainly not representative of all non-Catholic Anglo-American dispositions. Moderate Protestants condemned fierce anti-Catholicism as unbecoming of Christians and feared such attitudes would only keep Catholics from the “true” faith. As early as 1835, a writer of the *Western Monthly Magazine* lamented the proliferation of escaped nun stories. “A prejudice so indomitable and so blind,” complained the author, “could not fail, in an ingenious and enterprising land like ours, to be made the subject of pecuniary speculation; accordingly we find such works as... ‘Secrets of Female Convents,’ and ‘Six Months in a Convent,’ manufactured with a distinct view to making a profit out of this diseased state of the public mind.” Sisters likewise found advocates after the burning of the Ursuline Convent when dozens of Charlestown’s Protestants, including judge, Richard S. Fay, spoke up to defend the sisters. Similarly, after the infamous Nunnery

³⁰ George Bourne, *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable* (Philadelphia: J. M. Sanderson, 1816); Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 151; John Harper was a member of the Order of the United Americans; see Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 107; for more on Morse’s association with Maria Monk, see James Franklin Beard, ed., *The Letters and Journals of James Fennimore Cooper* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960): 3:220; Cross, *Priests' Prisons for Women*; for more on Brownlee, see Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 55-78 and 93-117.

Committee's investigations, a prominent Protestant Anglo-American Whig, Charles Hale, published a pamphlet upholding the sisters' rights against an unwarranted search based on religious bigotry.³¹

While references to the burning of Mount Benedict and the story of Maria Monk are a mainstay of any work on anti-Catholicism in America, there are few in-depth studies of these topics. In 2000 Nancy Lusignan Schultz, a professor of English, published a thorough and engaging narrative history of the burning of Mount Benedict. But hers is the only monograph on the topic written in the last hundred years and there are no scholarly books on Maria Monk and the importance of her *Awful Disclosures*. The burning of Mount Benedict was one of the worst acts of nativist violence in American history and Maria Monk's book was one of the most popular in American literature, yet historians have mostly ignored these topics. The continual success of dozens of convent narratives points further to the importance of this topic along with the centrality of convent opposition in Know Nothing politics before the Civil War. Yet works on nativism relegate convent propaganda and actions to the footnotes. Beyond the surface, the American campaign against convents provides insight into the religious, ethnic, political, cultural, and gender issues that embroiled the U.S. in the nineteenth century before the Civil War, revealing much about national character, fears, and values at the time.

Most people today would not recognize Maria Monk's name and news stories do not present nuns as a national threat, yet Maria Monk and the American campaign against convents has had a far-reaching influence. The Civil War quieted the outcry against nuns

³¹ "The Catholic Question," *Western Monthly Magazine* 3 (1835), 379; Richard S. Fay, "An Argument before the Committee of the House of Representatives upon the Petition of Benedict Fenwick and Others," (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1835); see Hale, "'Our Houses are Our Castles'" (1855).

for a time as over six hundred nuns from twenty-one different communities administered to the wounded and dying on the battlefield. By the 1880s, however, in part because of what historians describe as the “second wave” of immigration, anti-Catholicism along with opposition toward nuns resurfaced. Reprints of Maria Monk’s book along with a host of new convent exposés, such as *My Life in a Convent* (1893), sold rapidly in book shops. Members of the second Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century, who added Jews and Catholics to their list of targets, sponsored lectures by alleged “escaped nun,” Helen Jackson, who recycled themes from earlier convent narratives. Despite the entrance of Catholics into mainstream America by the mid-twentieth century, John F. Kennedy’s bid for the presidency revived anti-Catholic arguments along with those against convents. Perhaps most perceptibly, the campaign against convents has persisted in popular culture—in films, comedy skits, and kitsch objects. In antebellum convent narratives, nuns appeared as naïve victims, masculine tyrants, silly idiots, and gothic figures. Silly nuns appear today emblazoned on cocktail napkins and featured in such comedy skits as “Nonsense.” The masculine disciplinarian is a mainstay of contemporary images of the teacher nun, from *The Blues Brothers*’ “Penguin,” to nun figurines with rulers poised to strike. Recent television series, including *American Horror Story* have kept scary nuns alive, and “naughty nuns” appear in films and Halloween costumes. While mostly void of the former vitriol, these stereotypes reflect the way in which mainstream America does not take women religious seriously, still seeing them as anything other than human.³²

³² For more on the role of sisters during the American Civil War, see Mary Denis Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989); Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Convent of Montreal, or, The Secrets of the Black Nunnery Revealed* (Philadelphia: Jordon Bros., 1892); Margaret Shepherd, *My Life in the Convent* (Philadelphia:

This project is more about the perception of nuns and convent life than the reality of the institution and its members. The portrayal of monastic life in convent literature, periodicals, handbills, rumors, and courtroom discussions reveals a great deal about early nineteenth century America. In *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style*, David Brion Davis argues that the “belief in a conspiracy” is just as helpful as an interpretative lens as whether or not a conspiracy existed. Conspiracies surrounded the discourse of convent life in nineteenth century America. And these imaginings provide insight into the values, fears, suspicions, and fascinations of many Americans. Convent narratives were inherently voyeuristic. Authors invited readers to enter beyond sturdy walls, to open locked doors and secret passageways, to peer into secret chambers. What they imagined occurred within this unknown world repelled and fascinated readers, contributing to longstanding suspicion of nuns, anti-Catholicism, and fascination with deviance. This project attempts to look beyond the literal descriptions of nuns and convent life and the violence and calls for reform enacted against them in order to peer inside the lives of those who created and consumed the American campaign against convents.³³

Jordon Bros., 1893); for more on the second Ku Klux Klan, see Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011); Helen Jackson, *Convent Cruelties, or, My Life in a Convent* (Detroit: n.p., 1919); for anti-Catholic arguments surrounding the Kennedy campaign, see Mark S. Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: A CrossroadBook, 2003); for a description of the image of nuns in popular films, see Maurine Sabine, *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* (New York: Fordham, 2013); and Mary Ann Janosik, “Madonnas in Our Midst: Representations of Women Religious in Hollywood Film,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 75-98; *The Blues Brothers*, directed by John Landis, Universal Pictures, 1980; “Nonsense,” Book, music, and lyrics by Dan Goggin, Off-Broadway, New York, NY, 1985-present; *American Horror Story: Asylum*, Season 2, American FX, 2012-2013.

³³ David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 5.

CHAPTER ONE

AN ESCAPED NUN: MARIA MONK AND HER AWFUL DISCLOSURES OF THE HOTEL DIEU

How unexpected to them will be the disclosures I make! Shut up in a place from which there has been thought to be but one way of egress, and that the passage to the grave, they considered themselves safe in perpetuating crimes in our presence and in making us share in their criminality as often as they chose. –Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu (1836)

Alone in her home in Montreal, Canada on the evening of November 9, 1834, Mrs. Robertson heard an abrupt knock at the door. Two men in working clothes and a disheveled young woman stood anxiously in the cool night air, asking to speak with Dr. William Robertson. Startled especially by the haggard-looking young woman, Mrs. Robertson refused to move from her position in the entryway, forcing the men to explain themselves in the cold. They had come across the woman on the banks of the Canal, near the St. Joseph Suburbs, they explained. Convinced that she intended to drown herself, they persuaded her to move away from the banks. Though she revealed little about herself, the woman had claimed that Dr. Robertson was her father. At this Mrs. Robertson immediately dismissed the suspicious lot from her doorstep, sending them back into the night as she waited for her husband's return.³⁴

When Dr. Robertson came home that night, his wife told him about the strange visitors and speculated that they took the poor girl to the watch-house. Though the hour was late, Dr. Robertson put his coat on and headed back out into the night. The watch-house held "the most profligate women of the town," taken off the streets for "inebriety and disorderly conduct." Despite being full to capacity that night, the wardens found the

³⁴ W. Robertson, "Affidavit of Dr. Robertson," in Appendix to the new edition of *Awful Disclosures by Maria Monk, of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal, Revised with an Appendix*, Maria Monk, (1836; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1977), 212.

girl who a few hours earlier stood at Robertson's doorstep. The doctor took a seat beside her in what was likely a noisy room with sleepless inmates. He probably spoke to her as he would to one of his patients as he asked her to explain her story. The girl acknowledged that she was not his daughter. For the past four years, she told him, her parents kept her locked up in the cellar, chained like a dog because she suffered from bouts of "temporary insanity." The doctor was suspicious of her story; her wrists bore no marks. But he took pity on the young girl; clearly something distressing must have led to her now sitting alone in a cell in the middle of the night. As a Justice of the Peace, he ordered her release from the watch-house. He also persuaded Rev. H. Esson, to whose Presbyterian congregation her parents allegedly belonged, to ascertain the girl's identity. After a few days Dr. Robertson learned that the name of the strange young woman was Maria Monk.³⁵

In August the following year, at ten o'clock at night, the Robertsons once more received a loud rapping at their door. This time two distinguished men of the city, with whom the Robertsons had an acquaintance, waited outside. Invited in, the men exchanged casual remarks with the Robertsons before explaining that "some very serious charges" had been made against the priests of the city and the nuns of the General Hospital, or the Hotel Dieu. Literally meaning, "hostel of God," the Hotel Dieu was a hospital run by nuns from the French order of Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph. Would Dr. Robertson, as a magistrate, make an inquiry regarding these charges? The accusations, explained the men, came from "a female who had been a Nun in that

³⁵ Robertson, "Affidavit of Dr. Robertson," 212 – 213; for more on Maria Monk, see Ray Allen Billington, "Maria Monk and Her Influence," *Catholic Historical Review* 22, no. 3 (October 1936): 283-296; Nancy Lusignan Schultz, "Introduction," in *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales: Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk* (West Lafayette, Ind.: NotaBell Books, 1999); and Ralph Thompson, "The Maria Monk Affair," *The Colophon* 17, no. 6 (1934).

Institution for four years.” She divulged “horrible secrets” of the establishment, including the “criminal intercourse between nuns and priests” and “their murdering their offspring of these criminal connexions.” As Robertson questioned the men further, he soon discovered that this was the same woman who visited his house last November. Her story, he learned, would soon be published in New York under the title: *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*.³⁶

Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* would reveal to the world once and for all what went on “within the walls of that prison house of death,” the Montreal convent. “How unexpected to them will be the disclosures I make!” she wrote. “Shut up in a place from which there has been thought to be but one way of egress, and that the passage to the grave, they considered themselves safe in perpetuating crimes... .” The book traced Monk’s reception into convent life back to her “want of religious instruction at home.” Though raised Protestant, Monk’s mother was “rather inclined to think well of Catholics.” So too was Maria Monk until the day she “took the veil.” Once a vowed member of the convent, she learned to her “utter astonishment and horror” that her chief duty as a nun was to lie to young novices about the benefits of convent life, to live in “criminal intercourse” with the priests, and to have no will of her own. As a first-hand witness, Monk led readers through every trap door and chamber, inside interior apartments, down into the cellar, “where two sisters were imprisoned,” and through hidden subterranean passages that connected the priests’ seminary with the convent for

³⁶ Robertson, 212 – 213.

“impure purposes.” While other nuns took their stories of horror to the grave, Monk managed to escape and to expose to the public the truth of convent life.³⁷

Sex and sadism defined daily life in the Hotel Dieu. “Every one of [the priests] was guilty of licentiousness,” confirmed Monk. Their “holy retreat,” merely allowed them to receive treatment “for the many diseases they contract[ed]” from a sinful lifestyle. Another product of their “abominable ways,” was the birth of many babies in the convent. These infants “were always baptized and immediately strangled” before being tossed into a giant pit in the cellar floor and covered with a “quantity of lime.” Monk attested to “at least eighteen or twenty” instances of infanticide while she resided at the Hotel Dieu. Giving greater credibility to her accusations, Monk admitted to participating in the violent murder of the one of the nuns. After Sister St. Frances protested against an instance of infanticide, she was seized, gagged, and tied to a bed on which a mattress was thrown on top. The nuns and priests joyfully “jumped upon the poor girl” until they “smothered and crushed [her] to death.” Though Monk regretted it, she had followed orders to bring St. Frances to her executors.³⁸

The nuns for the most part did not wish to participate in liaisons or infanticide, but were forced to on the threat of macabre penances or death. Those who refused to follow the tyrannical instructions of the priests and the mother superior were chained in the cellar and left to starve to death. One of the worst punishments Monk ever saw was “the cap.” This device was fastened onto the heads of nuns who “washed their hands without permission.” It would “throw [them] into convulsions...[that] no human being could

³⁷ Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*, in *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth Century Convent Tales*, Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk with an Introduction by Nancy Lusignan Schultz, 117, 1, 41, 24.

³⁸ Monk, *Awful Disclosures* in *Veil of Fear*, 95 – 96, 25, 99, 61.

endure for an hour.” Other nuns had “their flesh burned off their bones with red hot irons.” The superior often gagged nuns and tied their hands behind their backs “to teach submission.” She also made them drink the water in which she had washed her feet. The superior and priests called these “brutal obscenities... meritorious before God,” justifying their actions among a host of brainwashed nuns who were forbidden from reading the Bible and believed “the priests could do no sin.”³⁹

The one relief Monk enjoyed before her final escape was the company of Sister “Mad” Jane Ray, who constantly played tricks on the other nuns, the superior, and the priests of the Hotel Dieu. Though deemed insane, Jane Ray was the smartest of all the nuns in the convent; she knew English, had a keen sense of justice, and was always able to outwit her fellow sisters. Among “Mad Jane’s” tricks was sprinkling holy water all over the floor so that the inmates would trip and “break the silence.” She also moved the boards beneath the nuns’ beds “so that at night nearly a dozen nuns fell down upon the floor in getting into bed.” One night, Jane dressed a broomstick in a white cloth and lifted it up before the superior’s chamber windows. “Oh, Mon Dieu!” screamed the superior in fright, heaving her plump body into the lap of the sister beside her. The other nuns, who “all believed in ghosts,” were equally terrified. Monk’s brief respite was cut short, however, when she found “Mad Jane” hanging dead from the ceiling, likely from some insubordination, her hands tied behind her back and her mouth gagged, a scene very similar, Monk noted, “to that of the Inquisition.”⁴⁰

Maria Monk’s book drew heavily on a number of European precedents, including two London titles: *The Master-Key* (1724) and *The Monk* (1796). Both books revealed

³⁹ Monk, 115 – 117, 122, 106, 69, 118, 52, 50.

⁴⁰ Monk, 58, 69, 72, 104, 119, 69, 122.

the “many errors of Rome,” featuring convent life prominently. In *The Monk*, a best-selling novel, two young men lose their brides-to-be to a cunning priest who locks them away in a convent. Violence, lust, and even incest fill the pages, detailing the demise of the two convent captives. *The Master-Key*, published later in the U.S. as *The Great Red Dragon*, also enjoyed great success throughout Europe and America. Its subtitle: *How Haunted Virgins have been disposed and Devils were Cast Out to Let in Priests*, reflected the tenor of the work, which described illicit sex between nuns and priests, resulting pregnancies, infanticide, and brave escaped nuns. These works became popular in the U.S. as the degree of anti-Catholicism increased. Readers of *Awful Disclosures* and *Monk’s* collaborators on the book were likely familiar with their content.⁴¹

The first edition of *Awful Disclosures* ended abruptly with Monk’s “liberty” from the convent. After being impregnated by Fr. Phelan, a well-known priest of Montreal, she made a narrow escape from her gloomy prison to save the life of her unborn child. The second edition, released almost immediately after the first, included a lengthy sequel. Here she explained that she had slipped into a fit of melancholy after her escape and attempted to drown herself, only to be saved by two workmen. Attributing her rescue to divine providence, Monk became convinced of her own special mission to expose the horrors of popery.⁴²

⁴¹ Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk* (1796; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1952); for an analysis of *The Monk*, see Victoria Nelson, “Faux Catholic: A Gothic Subgenre from Monk Lewis to Dan Brown,” *Boundary 2* 34, no. 3 (2007): 87-107; Antonio Gavin, *The Master-Key to Popery* (Dublin, 1724; repr., London: J. Walthoe, 1725); Gavin, *The Great Red Dragon, or, The Master-Key to Popery* (New York: H. Dayton, 1860); see also Joan R. Gundersen, “Anthony Gavin’s ‘A Master-Key to Popery’: A Virginia Parson’s Best Seller,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 82 (January 1974): 39-46; Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 106.

⁴² All regular editions of *Awful Disclosures* are bound with the sequel.

Alone and friendless, she traveled to New York, where she believed she would find a more receptive audience for her story. Famished and exhausted by the time she arrived, Maria once more attempted to end her life before being rescued by a few men who discovered her and took her to an Alms House. Relatively new, Alms Houses, like other correctional facilities, began popping up in America's urban centers in the decades that followed the 1820s. They represented an institutional approach to deal with society's delinquents and dependents. Feeling near death, she requested to tell her story to the house chaplain. Rev. Arthur Tappan, an evangelical businessman and reformer, who allegedly listened intently to Monk's tale. He encouraged her to "search the scriptures" and to publish her autobiography. Enlightened by the Bible and revived in health, Monk took up Tappan's advice and soon after, with the help of certain "Protestant protectors," published *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*.⁴³

Awful Disclosures became an overnight sensation and enjoyed unprecedented popularity. In the first five weeks of its publication, the exposé sold over 20,000 copies. By 1860, sales surpassed 300,000, making it second only to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The manuscript was initially presented to Harper Brothers by Monk's "Protestant protectors," the Revs. William Hoyte, George Bourne, J. J. Slocum, and Theodore Dwight. Harpers turned down the manuscript, anxious to protect their reputation. But sensing the potential gain from such a work, the brothers commissioned

⁴³ For more on the advent of the Alms Houses, see David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971); Monk, 132 – 137. It is not clear whether Arthur Tappan was the real chaplain at the Alms House, or if Maria Monk actually attended an Alms House. What is clear is that Tappan was involved in the publication of her book along with other Protestant reformers, including George Bourne, William Hoyte, Theodore Dwight, and J. J. Slocum and that a year prior to the book's publication the Tappan brothers' New York business building burned down, which would later contribute to their declaring bankruptcy in 1837. For more information on the Tappans' finances, see Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 220.

two of their employees to set up a dummy press under their names, Howe and Bates, and the book appeared for the first time in January, 1836.⁴⁴

The association of such a prestigious enterprise with the publication of this book reveals the pervasive nature of anti-Catholicism at this time and an understanding of the prospective popularity of a salacious exposé of convent life. J. and J. Harper formed a printing firm in 1817, first publishing 500 copies of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke. By 1830 they had the largest publishing house in the U.S. Harper and Brothers pioneered the use of stereotyping, the steam-powered press, and cloth for binding. In addition to American works, Harpers became the premier venue for early reprints of English novels, and impressive illustrated Bibles. Harper Brothers historian, Eugene Exman, however, described *Awful Disclosures* as the “most disgraceful book the brothers had connection with.” In addition to setting up the dummy press, Harpers manufactured the book, supplying the printing machinery and material. They secured a note signed by Maria Monk in which she swore to the truth of her disclosures and later became involved in a lawsuit over royalty payments and copyright of *Awful Disclosures*.⁴⁵

Samuel S. Smith and W. C. Brownlee, editors of two of the foremost anti-Catholic papers, *The Downfall of Babylon* and the *American Protestant Vindicator*, also colluded with the promoters of Maria Monk’s book. Just before its publication, both papers printed an unusual number of articles on the corruption of convents and advertised

⁴⁴ Figures in Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (1938; repr., New York: Quadrangle, 1964), 108.

⁴⁵ “Harper and Brothers, 1833-1962,” in *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1638-1899*, Part 1, edited by Peter Dzwonkoski (Detroit: A Bruccoli Clark Book, 1986), 192; Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper: A Unique Publishing Partnership and Its Impact upon the Cultural Life of America, from 1817 to 1853* (New York: Harper and Row, 1865), 61.

Monk's upcoming book itself. The papers profited from Monk's popularity for the next couple of years, devoting significant space to updates and "final proof" on what would turn out to be a dramatic controversy.⁴⁶ Smith, a self-styled "late popish-priest," edited *Downfall of Babylon, or the Triumph of Truth over Popery* and later edited a convent narrative similar to Monk's. *The American Protestant Vindicator and Defender of Civil Religious Liberties* ran under the directorship of Brownlee, a minister of the Reformed Dutch Church and a "D.D.," or "Divinitatis Doctor," with an advanced degree in divinity. A few years before *Awful Disclosures* appeared, Brownlee wrote *Letters in the Roman Catholic Controversy*, a book devoted to combating the tenets of Catholicism and warning against its influence in democratic societies. Both Smith and Brownlee pled Maria Monk's case, emerging as public representatives for the truth of *Awful Disclosures*.⁴⁷

Monk's so-called "Protestant protectors" lent an aura of credibility and respectability to her story. Arthur Tappan, who supported Monk from the beginning and who raised no objections to his name appearing in over 300,000 copies of the book, was a prominent New York reformer, minister, and businessman. Tappan helped establish the American Anti-Slavery Society and worked closely with William Lloyd Garrison, even bailing him out of jail in 1830. The hefty sums of money he and his brother, Rev. Lewis Tappan, donated to various evangelical reform movements made them national figures, known to the public as simply "the Tappan brothers." William Hoyte, the fiercest defender of Monk and alleged father of her child (instead of Fr. Phelan), had been a

⁴⁶ Billington, "Maria Monk and Her Influence," 287.

⁴⁷ *Downfall of Babylon* 1, no. 1 (August 14, 1834) and 1, no. 34 (July 4, 1835); for more on these periodicals, see Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 92 – 93.

Methodist minister and missionary in Canada. For undisclosed reasons Hoyte was dismissed from the ministry before he met Maria Monk. George Bourne also spent time in Canada as a missionary, subsequently publishing a travel guide. He was an English Presbyterian minister and active abolitionist whose 1816 publication, *The Book and Slavery, Irreconcilable*, inspired William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist movement. Bourne was also the editor of one of the first openly anti-Catholic periodicals, *The Protestant*, which began in 1830 in New York.⁴⁸

J. J. Slocum and Theodore Dwight were likewise Protestant ministers and reformers. Slocum actively participated in the New York Protestant Association. Dwight, the great grandson of the sage of New England, Jonathan Edwards, worked as a lawyer and leading member of the New York State Prison Discipline Association. His own publication, *Open Convents*, published the same year as Monk's book, called for the civil inspection of Catholic religious houses. By the second half of the century, copies of *Awful Disclosures* listed the names of Dwight, Slocum, and Hoyte as authors. Moreover, the eminent New York mayoral candidate, painter, and inventor, Samuel F. B. Morse also pledged support to Maria Monk and even considered proposing marriage to her. Their association with Maria Monk and *Awful Disclosures* suggests that the popularity of her tale was not relegated to the more gullible, prejudiced, and fanatic members of society. Indeed the very association of Monk's defenders with their respective reform movements

⁴⁸ For more information on the Tappan brothers, see Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 107-111, 150-161, 220-227; see also Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815 – 1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 33-34; for information on George Bourne, see Abzug, 134-5, 151; see also Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 53; George Bourne, *The Book and Slavery, Irreconcilable* (Philadelphia: J. M. Sanderson, 1816).

aligned the crusade against alcohol, slavery, and illiteracy with that against Rome, and in this case, the nuns and priests of the Hotel Dieu of Montreal.⁴⁹

Despite Monk's poverty, her "pious" efforts to "expose" convent crimes afforded her a degree of social respectability. The term "respectable" often related to characterizations of the emerging middle class. As Stuart M. Blumin has pointed out, modern social classes, noted by the distancing of middling and lower sorts based on "white collar" and physical labor, developed most notably in the middle of the nineteenth century. Standards of manners and material culture, denoted by "gentility," also set the new middle class apart from those dependent on manual labor. Yet as Daniel Cohen has observed, the two terms carried different connotations. While "gentility" referred primarily to style of living and manners, "respectability" referred to one's religious or moral character, despite material or economic conditions.⁵⁰ In a way, publishing *Awful Disclosures* allowed Maria Monk the opportunity to rise in social status by becoming "respectable." Monk's Protestant protectors, moreover, noted both for their middle-class economic status and laudable religious character, instilled Monk's story with both respectability and gentility.

Awful Disclosures enjoyed a broad readership and inspired a host of imitations.

Though he himself disbelieved the book's accusations, the editor of the *Quarterly*

⁴⁹ For information on Theodore Dwight, see Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 240. Information on Morse's support to Monk and his courtship with her cited in a letter by James Fenimore Cooper to his wife postmarked New York, October 27, 1835, *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard (Harvard University Press, 1960), 3:220.

⁵⁰ Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); for a synthesis of scholarship on middle-class material culture, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992); for a distinction of the terms "respectable" and "genteel," see Daniel Cohen, "The Respectability of Rebecca Reed: Genteel Womanhood and Sectarian Conflict in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1996), 422-425.

Christian Spectator, a New Haven journal of theology and literature, referred to the “almost universal credit” given to Monk’s story. Polemicists along with “well-informed and intelligent men” believed and supported Maria Monk without question. “Immense editions of the work were sold in rapid succession and gained to an astonishing degree, belief among all classes of readers,” the article announced. Other escaped nuns appeared almost immediately afterward, whose stories were remarkably similar to that of Monk’s. *Rosamond Culbertson* (1836), *The Escaped Nun* (1855), *The Convent’s Doom* (1854), and *The Nun of St. Ursula* (1845), among others, all went on to be best-sellers before the Civil War. The height of Maria Monk’s infamy as the escaped nun from Montreal only lasted a few years, but the legacy of her story had a much greater reach.⁵¹

The rising tide of anti-Catholicism in America by the 1820s and 1830s created a receptive market for stories like that of Maria Monk’s. A small minority in the colonial era, Roman Catholics grew in number from 300,000 at the beginning of the century to about 600,000 in 1830. The number of priests, seminaries, convents, Catholic newspapers, and benevolent institutions proliferated as well. Internal or American conversion to Catholicism constituted one aspect of this growth. As many as two thousand people from New England alone converted to Catholicism between 1820 and 1840. German and especially Irish immigration, however, ushered in the greatest number of Catholics to the U.S. To ward off the spread of Rome in America, Protestants sponsored anti-Catholic literature, engaged Catholics in public debates, and formed various anti-Catholic associations, including the Home Missionary Society in 1826, the

⁵¹ “Maria Monk and Her Impostures: Awful Disclosures,” *Quarterly Christian Spectator* 9, no. 2 (June 1, 1837), 263, 270.

New York Protestant Association in 1830, and later the Protestant Reformation Society among other groups.⁵²

A coterie of former priests and nuns—alleged and otherwise—joined forces with those who opposed Catholic influence, their renegade status lending credibility to anti-Catholic arguments. As a “former nun,” Monk extended a unique insiders’ perspective on convent life. She could be trusted as an eye-witness and participant of the corruptions she described. A year earlier, *Six Months in a Convent* an exposé by former novice, Rebecca Reed, made best-seller lists. While exceedingly tamer than Monk’s work, as an eye-witness account *Six Months* attracted considerable attention. First-hand accounts also provided some of the most compelling abolitionist literature. Slave autobiographies and memoirs carried a certain weight that stories and arguments from outsiders could not match. The same was true for “ex-priest” and “ex-nun” accounts, which became a mainstay of anti-Catholic literature in this era. Out of all the Catholic “renegades,” no one gained as great attention as Maria Monk.⁵³

The Canadian press was the first to respond to the accusations in *Awful Disclosures*. The *Montreal Courier* denounced the work as “abominably false.” Feeling a duty to “defend the defamed,” the press set out to “expose the falsehood” perpetuated in

⁵² Statistics quoted in Thomas T. McAvoy, C.S.C., *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 133; for more on American conversions to Catholicism, see Eleanor Simpson, “The Conservative Heresy: Yankees and the ‘Reaction in Favor of Roman Catholics’” (Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1974).

⁵³ For “ex-priest” works, see William Hogan, *A Synopsis of Popery* (Boston: Redding and Co., 1845); and Hogan, *Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries* 2nd ed. (Hartford: Silas, Andrus, and Son, 1854); for a description of the popularity of ex-nun and ex-priest tales in the early nineteenth century, see Barbara Welter, “From Maria Monk to Paul Blanshard: A Century of Protestant Anti-Catholicism,” in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, Robert N. Bellah, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 48; for more information of Rebecca Reed and *Six Months in a Convent*, see Daniel A. Cohen, “Miss Reed and the Superiors: The Antebellum Contradictions of Convent Life in America,” *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 149-184. Ray Allen Billington suggests the influence of previously popular convent narratives, such as Rebecca Reed’s, on the publication of *Awful Disclosures*, in *The Protestant Crusade*, 99.

Monk's book. The editors confirmed the good character of the nuns and priests of the Hotel Dieu, writing of their "unimpeachable conduct" and "unwearied Christian charity," especially during the "two years of pestilence," referring to a cholera epidemic in Lower Canada. This was not simply a defense of the city's Catholic institutions, the editors claimed. As Protestants who "glory to be so," they nevertheless took personal offense at the accusations in *Awful Disclosures*. "We should regard ourselves to be degraded in the eyes of the world," explained the article, "did we live in a community where such abominations existed, and not dare to denounce the perpetrators."⁵⁴ Their condemnation of *Awful Disclosures* was thus a defense at once of the Hotel Dieu and the good name of Montreal.

In part, the editors were responding to anti-Canadian sentiment. Due to the country's association with French and later Irish Catholicism and its status as a British colony, anti-Canadian feeling prevailed in the United States during the Jacksonian era. These prejudices were only heightened as working class Canadians migrated south to find work in New England's textile factories. The notion that Lower Canada was "depraved" often appeared in the writings of Protestant missionaries from the U.S. In one of George Bourne's pamphlets on his experience as a Canadian missionary, he described the country as "debased by the prevalence of Roman supremacy."⁵⁵ Such sentiments made

⁵⁴ By the 1820s Lower Canada had five Catholic hospitals that cared for the elderly and the sick. In Montreal was the Hotel Dieu and the Hospital General. They cared for citizens during the frequent epidemics, like the cholera epidemic that struck in 1832 and 1834. See Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, eds. *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (New York: Oxford, 1996), 94; *The Montreal Courier* (Nov. 16, 1835) in Monk, Appendix in *Awful Disclosures*, (1836 repr.; Arno Press, 1977), 211.

⁵⁵ George Bourne described his missionary efforts in Canada in *The Picture of Quebec and Its Vicinity* (Quebec: D. and J. Similie, 1829); reference from a prospectus and promotion of *The Protestant* in the *New York Observer*, November 14, 1829, quoted in Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 54; for an overview of anti-Canadian sentiment and its relation to anti-Catholic literature, see Rebecca Sullivan, "A Wayward in the Wilderness: Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* and the Feminization of Lower Canada in the Nineteenth Century," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 62 (Fall 1997): 201-222.

the accusations in *Awful Disclosures* that much more believable to the American public. Aware of this unfavorable reputation, the Canadian press acted to defend their countrymen and women in the face of what they considered to be a libelous work against Lower Canada.

Despite the greater popularity Monk's work enjoyed in the U.S., many papers in the states were also quick to denounce the book. The *Vermont State Paper* rebuked it as a "miserable catchpenny" which would "disgrace a brothel." The *Boston Statesmen* blasted it as "miserable libel from beginning to end." Other papers criticized the book for pandering to anti-Catholic sentiment. The editor of the *New Hampshire Sentinel* lamented that "thousands will likely purchase, read, and believe" the book because nothing was "too bad for Catholics." The *Vermont State Paper* likewise relegated the readership of the work to those who "find in the Catholic religion a theme of continued crimination." Still others rejected *Awful Disclosures* as distasteful and preposterous. The *New York Sunday Morning News* contended that no "sane man" would believe that a "whole religious community... is a murderer and worse than a murderer." "We cannot deem it founded on truth—the statements are too shocking for belief," concluded the editor of the *New Yorker*. The book would only appeal to those of "the most depraved taste," continued the *New Yorker*.⁵⁶

Yet the reading public of "depraved tastes" appeared to prevail. There were numerous associations and periodicals, Protestant or otherwise, which expressed full-fledged belief in *Awful Disclosures*. A month after its release, the *New York Journal of Commerce* admitted "there is strong internal evidence of the truth of the stories." *The*

⁵⁶ *Albany Argus* quoted in the *Vermont State Paper* 1, issue 34, February 9, 1836; *New Hampshire Sentinel* 38, issue 6, February 11, 1836; *New York Sunday Morning News* and *New Yorker* quoted in *New Hampshire Sentinel*, Feb. 11, 1836.

Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, a fiercely anti-Catholic paper, never wavered in its support of Monk. The paper condemned all convents as prisons of “misery and superstition” on the “authority of Maria Monk.” *Zion’s Herald*, published in Boston, professed continual support of Monk even after investigations suggested the falsity of her story, writing by September of 1836 “we have always said that Maria Monk’s book bears irrefragable, irrefutable evidence of truth.” The Protestant Association of New York likewise pledged unyielding support to Maria Monk by officially challenging the bishops of Montreal and various American cities to defend themselves in the face of her accusations.⁵⁷

By the 1830s, lots of presses offered cheap weekly or daily papers, keeping the public updated on politics, commercial news, crime reports, and religious, reform, or cultural interests. The decade also witnessed the birth of a cheap alternative press known as “penny papers” that focused more on sensational news and crime than politics or economics. Unsurprisingly, the penny presses jumped on the sensational story of Maria Monk and the Hotel Dieu. The New York *Sun*, one of the first penny presses, immediately lent support to Monk and kept readers abreast of the controversy. Religious presses, like *The Downfall of Babylon*, *Protestant Vindicator*, *Zion’s Herald*, and *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, while not penny presses, also used sensationalism in their anti-Catholic pieces, relying less on theological arguments and more on reports of corruption and vice.

⁵⁷ New York *Journal of Commerce* quoted in *New Hampshire Sentinel*, Feb. 11, 1836; “Living Death: New Carmelite Nuns,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 2, issue 3, March 1836; “Interview with Maria Monk,” *Zion’s Herald* 7, issue 36, September 7, 1836; “Maria Monk,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 2, issue 9, September 1836.

Most non-penny presses condemned Monk's book. The *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, a non-sectarian periodical with a Whig bent, devoted significant space to refuting *Awful Disclosures*. *The New Yorker*, edited by the Horace Greeley, and the *New York Commercial Advertiser* also firmly denounced the book. And yet, complicating this dichotomy somewhat, the *New York Journal of Commerce*, a non-partisan, serious paper, supported Monk. Monk received mixed political support as well, as some Whig papers supported her, such as *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, while others did not, such as *The New Yorker*. Decidedly Democratic papers showed no interest in the work. *Awful Disclosures* proved prime fodder for sensational presses that catered to a growing public interest in sensational "news."⁵⁸

Maria Monk's popularity in the U.S. took a sharp turn when her mother formally testified against her. That same August of 1835, when the Robertson's heard of the allegations against the nuns and priests of Montreal, Isabella Monk, Maria Monk's mother, also received a number of strange visitors to her home and had an unusual encounter with her daughter. The city of Montreal collected her testimony, along with Dr. Robertson's and those of other city residents, as formal affidavits against the veracity of *Awful Disclosures*. The *Montreal Courier* and the *New York Catholic Diary* published the affidavits shortly after their release. The *Protestant Vindicator* dismissed Mrs.

⁵⁸ For a description on the rise and nature of the penny press, see John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press*, 34-5. In addition to *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, other religious presses that supported Monk and aligned themselves with the Whig Party, included *Downfall of Babylon* and *Zion's Herald*; For information on Horace Greeley and *The New Yorker*, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 184-5;). One Democratic paper that dismissed Monk was the *Vermont State Paper*.

Monk's testimony as "forged and fallacious," but its release marked the first substantial setback in the public faith in Maria Monk's disclosures.⁵⁹

Mrs. Monk testified that in mid-August a "decently dressed" man who introduced himself as Rev. Hoyte, a minister of New York, came to her door. Sitting inside Mrs. Monk's modest parlor, the minister apologetically explained his situation. He and Maria had a five-week-old baby girl, he informed Mrs. Monk. He wanted to take care of them, but Maria fled from him and the child where they were temporarily staying at "Goodenough's Tavern" in town. He questioned Mrs. Monk about her daughter's whereabouts. When Mrs. Monk callously shrugged her shoulders and waved the man off, he became indignant. How could a mother not care where her daughter was or about the well-being of her own granddaughter? Hoyte demanded that Mrs. Monk find her daughter, firing a series of questions at the woman which she apparently could not answer.⁶⁰

The minister also spoke "very bitterly against the Catholics, the Priests, and the Nuns," Mrs. Monk recalled. The minister said Maria had been in a nunnery where she had been tortured, starved, and coarsely handled by priests. Mrs. Monk again appeared unmoved. She denied that Maria had ever been in a convent except when she attended a day-school at age eight. Moreover, as a child she had broken a slate pencil in her skull and ever since was "deranged in the head." She would make up "the most ridiculous but plausible stories." Despite this alleged insight, Hoyte persisted. Perhaps to convince him that she was not unduly obstinate, Mrs. Monk told Hoyte that she was a Protestant and

⁵⁹ "Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal," *American Protestant Vindicator* 2, no. 39, Wednesday, June 29, 1836. New York Public Library.

⁶⁰ "Affidavit of My Mother," in Appendix to *Awful Disclosures*, 215-220.

“did not like the Roman Catholic religion.” Nevertheless, she respected the priests and nuns of Montreal as the most “charitable persons I ever knew,” and so she refused to believe his story. At that, the reverend left.⁶¹

The next day, Rev. Hoyte returned to Mrs. Monk’s front door. He explained that he had found Maria and that their little family planned to depart for New York City the following day. Mrs. Monk expressed no wish to see her daughter or granddaughter before their departure, though she did not explain in the affidavit the hostility between herself and Maria. Writing forty years later, Maria Monk’s daughter described Mrs. Monk as a callous woman who had kicked Maria out of the house for some “indiscretion,” forcing her to take refuge in an asylum for “fallen women.” Perhaps sensing the woman’s lack of maternal instincts, Hoyte assumed another approach. If Mrs. Monk would only say that her daughter had been a nun, “it would be better than one hundred pounds.” She would be “protected for life,” and could move away from Montreal should any hostility with her neighbors arise. According to the affidavit, Mrs. Monk responded that “thousands of pounds would not induce me to perjure myself.” At this, Hoyte flew into a rage. He got “saucy and abusive to the utmost.” And then he went away, leaving Mrs. Monk’s home for the last time. She would not hear about her daughter again until Maria was an international sensation for her exposé of the Hotel Dieu convent.⁶²

⁶¹ In the Jacksonian era, in the beginning stages of the development of the insane asylum, most general practitioners believed insanity was a disease of the brain that could be caused by “blows on the head.” See Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 110 – 111; Monk, 216 – 217. There was a general ecumenical spirit among Protestants and Catholics in Canada before the 1840s when tens of thousands of Irish famine migrants moved into the British North American colonies after 1845. See Murphy and Perin, eds. *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

⁶² Mrs. L. St. John Eckel, *Maria Monk’s Daughter: An Autobiography* (New York: United States Publishing Company, 1875), 171; Monk, 218 – 220.

Mrs. Monk's formal testimony led some major American newspapers to switch their positions on *Awful Disclosures*. The *Barre Gazette* of Massachusetts renounced their endorsement of Maria Monk published "a week or two ago." "It turns out to be all a humbug," stated the article, since "the mother of Maria Monk has since sworn that her daughter was never in a convent." The *New Bedford Mercury*, admitted to being convinced "by a number of affidavits from Canadian papers," that Maria Monk was not the true author of *Awful Disclosures* and that she was a "woman of bad character" and "mental derangements." Supporters of Monk countered these affidavits with those of their own, leading to a veritable press war over *Awful Disclosures* and consequently greater overall public interest in the controversy.⁶³

Maria Monk's "protectors" kept pace with growing suspicions that stemmed from Mrs. Monk's affidavit. The *Protestant Vindicator* claimed that in fact the bribe came not from Rev. Hoyte but from Montreal priests who promised Mrs. Monk one hundred pounds if she would say Maria "had not been in a nunnery at all." Mrs. Monk's character was enough to condemn her as a witness, according to the *Vindicator*. Her "habitual intemperance, coarse impiety, [and] long-indulged hatred and cruelty towards her daughter" demonstrated the "worthlessness" of her testimony. J. J. Slocum, a Presbyterian minister, and one of Maria Monk's "Protestant protectors," also railed against Mrs. Monk's affidavit. He blasted her as "unreliable" because of "an extreme

⁶³ "Maria Monk," *Barre Gazette* 2, issue 40, February 19, 1836; *New Bedford Mercury* 29, issue 34, February 26, 1836.

backwardness” characteristic of Canadians and even alleged that Mrs. Monk had “gone so far as to threaten her [daughter’s] life.”⁶⁴

The second edition of *Awful Disclosures*, published almost immediately after the first, also responded to Mrs. Monk and Dr. Robertson’s affidavits. It sought to clarify the otherwise suspicious appearance of Monk in Montreal in the summer of 1835. The reason why Monk was found along the canal about to commit suicide in August of 1835 was because of the great suffering she endured at the convent. This suffering was also the cause of her supposed “derangement of mind,” and provided an explanation for the strange stories she told to Dr. Robertson. When Rev. Hoyte visited Mrs. Monk in Montreal, he and Maria were there to obtain legal information against the Hotel Dieu. The excitement of this venture might have led “to some appearances of derangement” in Monk. A number of papers reprinted a version of this extended story, including the *New York Evangelist*, the *New York Journal of Commerce*, the *Farmer’s Cabinet*, *Zion’s Herald*, and the *New Bedford Mercury*. With Maria Monk making headlines across the country, her true story depended on which paper one consulted.⁶⁵

Supporting Monk with more than words, Samuel Smith, editor of the *Downfall of Babylon*, published graphic images based on scenes in *Awful Disclosures*. The illustrated book, *Dreadful Scenes in the Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, vividly unveiled “what awful deeds are perpetrated under the cloak of religion.” One image portrayed the death of Sister St. Frances with nuns and priests as fiends, taking gross pleasure in murdering a

⁶⁴ “The Testimony of Maria Monk Considered,” *Protestant Vindicator* 2, no. 45, August 11, 1836; Rev. J. J. Slocum, *Confirmation of Maria Monk’s Disclosures Concerning the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal; Preceded by a Reply to the Priests’ Book*, 2nd ed. (London: James S. Hodson, 1837), 3.

⁶⁵ Monk, “Sequel” in *Awful Disclosures* (1836 repr.; Arno, 1977); “Maria Monk and Her Awful Disclosures: From One Who Knows,” *New York Evangelist* 7, issue 15, April 9, 1836.

nun by smothering her under a mattress. As some of the masculine looking nuns jumped up and down on the victim beneath the mattress, others stood by goading them on. Other scenes depicted the credulous nuns' belief that sheet-covered brooms were ghosts, and the morbid death of "Mad" Jan Ray hanging upside down by a rope. The public glimpsed the infamous rumored infanticide in a fourth image which pictured a nun dropping a murdered baby into a giant lime pit in the convent cellar floor. At a distance in this scene a priest rises up through a trap door leading to the subterranean passage. The gloomy, dark stone room provided a gothic backdrop while the image of the woman releasing her child into the abyss suggested the dangerous inversion of motherhood that results from living the life of a nun. The publication of these images reinforced overarching arguments and suspicions in *Awful Disclosures*, making caricatures of convent life and nuns while allowing other avenues for profit from the Maria Monk controversy.⁶⁶

In response to the escalating spectacle, six men of Montreal, mostly Protestants, three of them ministers, launched a formal investigation of the Hotel Dieu convent. Rev. Curry served as Secretary of the Home Missionary Society; Revs. G. W. Perkins and Henry Esson were Presbyterian ministers; Benjamin Holmes, Esq. was a cashier of the Montreal Bank and Justice of the Peace; John Estell, Esq. worked as an architect and surveyor; and J. Jones, the only Roman Catholic, was editor of the Montreal paper, *L'Ami du Peuple*. Without notice, the men descended on the convent with Monk's depiction of the premises in hand and conducted a search "from the cellar to the roof." Despite their unannounced arrival, Curry reported that nuns "cheerfully opened every enclosure" to the investigators. Afterwards, he declared he was "unable to find any resemblance whatever

⁶⁶ "Dreadful Scenes in the Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk," *Downfall of Babylon* 2, no. 15, April 2, 1836.

between that building...and that map furnished by Maria Monk.” Perkins agreed that it would be “impossible” for a person “at all acquainted with the internal plan of the nunnery, could have drawn up the map...given in [Monk’s] book.” In an article entitled, “Maria Monk, the Nun-Such,” the *Saturday Evening Post* later interpreted the results of the investigation as proof that Maria Monk was an “impudent humbug.” The *Portsmouth Journal of Literature* likewise confirmed the conclusions of the investigators and the “upstanding character” of the Hotel Dieu.⁶⁷

But “interior alternations have been made!” came the resounding response of Monk’s supporters. And they had a second escaped nun from the Hotel Dieu to prove it. Like Monk, Sister St. Francis Patrick, or Frances Patridge, offered a salacious and incriminating narrative of the Hotel Dieu and claimed that she too made a narrow escape from its walls. According to *Zion’s Herald* and the *New York Sun*, Patrick’s story would not only prove the truth of *Awful Disclosures* “beyond all rational doubt,” but also make Monk’s accusations appear tame. At twenty-seven years old, Patridge was “tall and graceful” and had a “penetrating vivacity” in her eyes. Allegedly based on his interviews with this woman, Samuel Smith wrote her story and published it through the office of *The Downfall of Babylon*. The pamphlet-sized narrative was mostly a prop for *Awful Disclosures*. As a corrective to the recent investigation of the convent, Patridge confirmed that the interior of the Hotel Dieu “had been so entirely altered since Miss

⁶⁷ Description of the investigation and statements by the investigators were subsequently published in J. Jones, *Awful Exposure Awful Exposure of the Atrocious Plot Formed by Certain Individuals Against the Clergy and Nuns of Lower Canada, through the Intervention of Maria Monk. With an Authentic Narrative of Her Life, from Her Birth to the Present Moment and an Account of Her Impositions, etc.* (New York: Jones & Co. of Montreal, 1836). They were also reprinted in “Maria Monk and Her Impostures,” *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, June 1, 1837; *L’Ami du Peuple* was a “moderate” paper of Montreal that did not support lower Canada’s revolutionary movement; “Maria Monk, the Nun-Such,” *Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post*, (Indianapolis) August 13, 1836; *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, August 20, 1836.

Monk's escape, that no one could recognize it as the same." Smith upheld the story as "confirm[ing] all that Maria Monk had stated" and contributing more "as far surpassing in horror."⁶⁸

The final proof in female form, however, proved to be more of a liability than an asset to the claims of Maria Monk. Not long after the publication of the story of this new escaped nun, Miss Patridge "deserted the confederacy," charging her male Protestant protectors with "taking undue liberties with her person." Before her retreat from their assembly, she also declared Monk to be an impostor and herself alone as the "authentic escapee from the Montreal nunnery." Later Rev. Brownlee, president of the Protestant Reformation Society and editor of the *Protestant Vindicator*, claimed that Patridge was a Jesuit in disguise. Whether or not her retreat from Monk's coterie was a Jesuit scheme, however, the association with Patridge harmed Monk's reputation for reliability.⁶⁹

A few months later, J. Jones, of the investigative committee, published his own book-length denunciation of Monk entitled *Awful Exposure of the Atrocious Plot Formed by Certain Individuals Against the Clergy and Nuns of Lower Canada*. He deplored Monk's book as a "tissue of ill-constructed lies from beginning to end." Proceeding to correct these "lies," Jones addressed minute and major details. The nuns of the Hotel Dieu were not sometimes called "Sisters of Charity," as mentioned in the book, since they were a different order. "It is untrue that any of the nuns are veiled, if this implied concealing the face." Moreover, the Hotel Dieu "never sent a 'rich carpet' to the king of

⁶⁸ Both stories printed in "Interview with Maria Monk," *Zion's Herald*, Sept. 7, 1836.; Samuel B. Smith, a late popish priest, *The Escape of Sainte Frances Patrick, Another Nun from the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal, to which is appended a Decisive Confirmation of the Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (New York: Office of the Downfall of Babylon, 1836), 5 – 8.

⁶⁹ Description of Patridge's retreat in "Maria Monk and Her Impostures," *Quarterly Christian Spectator*; see also Billington, "Maria Monk and Her Influence," 295; statement of Brownlee quoted in *New York Observer*, Oct. 6, 1838.

England ‘as an expression of gratitude for the money annually received.’” The Hotel Dieu had never received funds from the monarchy at all. Monk wrote of nuns laying down inside a coffin that bore their name during the “veil taking” ceremony. “Is it necessary to say that there is no such coffin?” asked Jones. He corrected a number of other fine points and also pointed out that, contrary to certain descriptions in Monk’s book, none of the sisters sported beards.⁷⁰

More significantly, Jones challenged the notion that Maria Monk ever spent time in the Hotel Dieu as a nun. Monk did have some experience with nuns, he argued, but this was during her residence at the Magdalen Asylum, a place for the restoration of prostitutes. Like other “houses of correction” during the antebellum era, Magdalen Asylums were established to reform prostitutes or women given to a “licentious lifestyle” by isolating them from the rest of society and imposing upon them a strict regimen of daily tasks, including prayer and devotion. Named after Mary Magdalen, a woman in the New Testament who had been healed of her life of sexual crime by Jesus, the Magdalen Asylums were largely run as explicitly religious institutions, Catholic and Protestant.⁷¹

Jones described how Monk’s portrait of the Hotel Dieu matched not the convent but the asylum. Monk attested to fifty girls living at the Hotel Dieu, and there were fifty girls in the asylum. Monk mentioned a few nuns by name, including Jane McCoy and Jane Ray, but these two women were “reformed prostitutes” and inmates of the asylum during Monk’s residence there. Mrs. McDonnell, keeper of the Montreal Magdalen Asylum confirmed Monk’s residency for a number of months in 1835. McDonnell tried

⁷⁰ Jones, *Awful Exposure*, 15, 6, 13, 47, 36.

⁷¹ For more information on Magdalen Asylums, see Steven Ruggles, “Fallen Women: The Inmates of the Magdalen Society Asylum of Philadelphia, 1836 – 1908,” *Journal of Social History* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1983): 65-82.

to “restore her to the habits of virtue; but Monk proved a hardened sinner.” The description Monk provided of the Hotel Dieu, McDonnell confirmed, matched her own ward precisely.⁷²

Jones used this information to dismiss Monk’s character, repeatedly referring to her as “the prostitute,” and writing that her inaccurate description was “not surprising for a prostitute.” After leaving the asylum, Jones theorized, Monk “wandered from place to place” until she took up with a “disgraced and cast-off clergyman,” Rev. Hoyte. She pretended to be his wife and told him about her experience in the asylum. Out of his “love of lucre” the clergyman suggested a use for this story, and *Awful Disclosures* was born. So too was a love child, Monk’s alleged evidence of her molestation at the Hotel Dieu. It was thus more likely, argued Jones, that Monk escaped from the Magdalen Asylum of Montreal only to run into and share her experience with William Hoyte, who converted her story from escaping from the Catholic-run prostitute asylum to the convent. He would also have had a prototype for this narrative in the form of Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months in a Convent*.⁷³

Jones’ book rankled the defenders of Maria Monk, who once again scurried to defend *Awful Disclosures*. Slocum retorted with his own book, *Reply to the Priest’s Book, Denominated, “Awful Exposure of the Atrocious Plot formed by Certain Individuals against the Clergy and Nuns of Lower Canada, through the Intervention of Maria Monk.”* Rev. Brownlee, also took the time to condemn Jones in the *Protestant Vindicator*. One article criticized him for having purely monetary motives, writing that he “had no doubt that he should clear several thousand dollars by the book refuting Monk’s

⁷² Jones, 32, 124, 40, 88, 32, 66.

⁷³ Jones, 32, 124, 40.

statements.” More extreme in his denunciations, Samuel Smith accused Jones of conspiring with the priests of Montreal to abduct Monk from New York and return her to the convent. Though Jones may have diminished the credibility of Monk’s book, the continued amount of energy directed toward the back and forth publications attests to the growing controversy and interest that surrounded her throughout 1836.⁷⁴

The priests of Montreal themselves had little to say in response to *Awful Disclosures*. According to one paper, this was because they considered something as clearly fictitious as *Gulliver’s Travels*, “beneath notice, belief, or refutation.” Monk’s supporters, however, pointed to this as further evidence of their guilt. “It is not a little remarkable,” read an article in the *Protestant Vindicator*, “that no one of all the persons so boldly impeached by her of the most atrocious crimes has even whispered a hint that she was not a nun.” In the revised edition, Monk claimed that she had anticipated no response from the priests of Montreal to her book because “they feared an investigation” and “further disclosures.” The book even claimed the priests felt a sense of relief that her “‘disclosures’ were not the most ‘awful’ which they had reason to expect.” The *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* criticized the Montreal priests’ silence as unmanly. “The way for men to acquit themselves of such charges is at once manly and boldly, to challenge and demand an instant examination into every particular.” Likewise, the American Tract Society, a Protestant benevolent association, officially labeled the priests of Montreal void of “manly honesty and virtuous innocence” in their neglect to allow the matter to be “brought to a fair trial.” Perspectives of priests as unmanly in their celibacy

⁷⁴ Slocum, *Confirmation of Maria Monk’s Disclosures Concerning the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*; *Protestant Vindicator* 2, no. 45, August 11, 1836; *Downfall of Babylon*, no. 28, October 1, 1836.

and submission to authority were widespread in the non-Catholic, Anglo-American community and naturally served as an easy explanation for their lack of response.⁷⁵

The following year, William L. Stone, a Protestant clergyman and editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, one of the most prominent Whig newspapers in the country, decisively undercut the claims of Maria Monk. He confessed an initial inclination to believe the “fearful revelations” of Monk because of his “prejudices against the Catholic faith.” The widespread “excitement” over the book inspired him to inspect the convent himself. If the nuns and priests were “actually guilty” of their alleged crimes, Stone claimed, then “the truth should be known,” and if not, “the accusers should be arrested.” Taking the work seriously, Stone, along with two other investigators, studied the illustrated version of *Awful Disclosures*, which included detailed maps of the premises as laid down by “Maria Monk’s memory.” With the book in hand on the day of the investigation, Stone and his cohort set their sights on “nothing short of a minute examination.” After personally investigating the Hotel Dieu of Montreal, “in every room, closet, and pantry,” Stone denounced the book as “wholly and unequivocally, from beginning to end, untrue.”⁷⁶

Of his first visit to the Hotel Dieu, Stone wrote he “might very well have expected to find [the convent] guarded by gorgons, hydras, and chimeras dire, *but it was not so.*”

⁷⁵ “Maria Monk and Her Impostures,” *Quarterly Christian Spectator*; “Was Maria Monk a Nun at the Hotel Dieu Convent at Montreal?” *American Protestant Vindicator*, August 11, 1836; Monk, “Appendix” in *Awful Disclosures*, 205; “Maria Monk,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, Sept. 1836; American Tract Society resolution published in Slocum, “Resolutions Respecting Maria Monk,” *Confirmation of Maria Monk’s Disclosures*, 85.

⁷⁶ Stone was the editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser* where he also published his incriminating evidence against Monk; William L. Stone, Esq., *The True History of Maria Monk: A Reprint of the Famous Report on her Charges*, Original Title: *A Refutation of the Fabulous History of the Arch-Impostor Maria Monk Being the Result of a Minute and Searching Inquiry by William L. Stone, Esq. of New York; To which are added other interesting testimonies, &c.* (1836 repr.; New York: Paulist Press, c. 1920), Anti-Catholic Printed Material Collection, Notre Dame Archives, 7, 6, 20, 22, 25, 26, 33.

After being led through a “wide open gate,” an English-speaking nun with an “agreeable appearance” led Stone through the building. He was surprised to discover such easy access into the convent and to see that the nuns were not as gloomy and masculine-looking as they appeared in *Awful Disclosures*. His guide conducted him through the apothecary and the hospital wards. Though not permitted into the “inner apartments” of the convent on his first visit without the permission of the bishop, Stone ended the first day of his investigation “having seen nothing of vipers” and hearing “no groans.”⁷⁷

On the second day, Stone and his cohort received the necessary permission from the bishop to search each room of the Hotel Dieu. They opened every trap-door and descended into every vault, discovering that the vaults were merely storerooms filled with hospital supplies. Stone suspected one door, “leading from the outside directly into the building” of possibly being the secret “subterranean passage” that connected the seminary and the convent. But it “merely proved to be the kitchen cellar,” a “receptacle of potatoes and turnips.” The three men even nosed around the nuns’ bedroom chambers. Of these Stone corrected the assumption that their “cells” were “dark and gloomy places.” Instead, they were “neat little apartments.” The nuns he encountered looked nothing like those depicted in *Awful Disclosures*. They were cheerful, with “faces wreathed in smiles.” Stone concluded after day two that as nothing of the convent’s interior matched the pages of the *Awful Disclosures*, “the author had never been within the walls of the cloister.”⁷⁸

While articles in *Downfall of Babylon* and the *Protestant Vindicator* repeatedly charged the administrators of the Hotel Dieu with making “material alterations” to the

⁷⁷ Stone, *The True History of Maria Monk*, 12 – 16.

⁷⁸ Stone, 22, 26, 31, 33, 27, 28, 30.

convent, Stone reported that “neither an outward wall nor a cellar nor a vault has been whitewashed.” The mason work was of “ancient and timeworn stone”; nothing had been changed. He even calculated the likelihood of *Awful Disclosures*’ charge of infanticide within the convent. According to the book, seventy-five babies were born and murdered in a year. Stone pointed out, however, that there were only thirty-six nuns living in the Hotel Dieu and that half of them were “past age.” This would mean that fifteen of them would had to have had given birth to two and half children a year. Stone finally considered the criticism of the Hotel Dieu not opening its doors to the public immediately after the release of Monk’s book. He found that if visitors were admitted at any time, the nuns would get nothing done. As each was “constantly employed,” their “patients would suffer” from such interruptions. Taken together, the evidence unearthed by Stone convinced him that “Maria Monk was an errant impostor; that she never was a nun...and that the nuns and priests were innocent in this matter.”⁷⁹

Stone’s forceful denunciation of *Awful Disclosures* unleashed a wave of reactionary responses. The Protestant Reformation Society in New York promptly issued a petition against Stone’s investigation. Samuel F. B. Morse, who allegedly courted Maria Monk for a time, was among the first to sign the petition. A year before the appearance of *Awful Disclosures*, Morse published two incendiary nativist books. In *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States* and *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* Morse accused the pope of colluding with European monarchs to take over the U.S. through immigration. *Downfall of Babylon* and *Protestant Vindicator* also unsurprisingly blasted Stone in almost every issue from the

⁷⁹ “Colonel Stone,” *Downfall of Babylon*, March 18, 1837; *Protestant Vindicator*, October 26, 1836; Stone, 35, 38, 33, 39.

time of his published report, in October 1836, through the following spring. “Stone has pleased the Papists wonderfully,” read an article in *Downfall*. The *Haverhill Gazette* of Massachusetts asserted that Stone was duped by the cunning Catholics of Montreal. *Protestant Vindicator* accused Stone of a more malicious intent, claiming that he sought to “aid the Jesuits” in a “Jesuitical hoax” and thus become a “stumbling block in the way of triumphing Protestantism.” Indeed, the editors made rejection of Stone’s conclusions a litmus test of true Christianity, stating that “every devout Christian...[stood] decidedly against the humbug of Col. Stone.”⁸⁰

As the months went by, the editors of the *Vindicator* and other critics got more creative in their attacks, with puns in abundance. It was because the Colonel was “Stone-blind, Stone-deaf, and Stone-hearted,” that he rejected the veracity of *Awful Disclosures*. The paper even employed poetry in their rebuke, likening Maria Monk to truth incarnate and Stone to the rock that was rolled away. “Maria Monk is still alive...For truth will ever live and thrive...Though covered by a mighty Stone.” The most elaborate criticism satirized Stone’s investigation in a volume-length epic poem. *The Vision of Rubeta, An Epic Story on the Island of Manhattan, with Illustrations Done on Stone*, was published in 1838. So popular was the epic that a one-act play based on the poem was published the same year. The American Tract Society resolved that Stone’s examination was “altogether unsatisfactory.” The Society further condemned those who suggested that Monk really resided in the Asylum as “unprincipled profligates [who] call themselves

⁸⁰ Information on the Reformation Society cited by Slocum, “Resolutions Respecting Maria Monk,” *Confirmation of Maria Monk’s Disclosures*, N.a. *Evidence Demonstrating the Falsehoods of William L. Stone, Concerning the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (New York, c. 1837), American Antiquarian Society; Samuel F. B. Morse, *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States and Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* (New York: E. B. Clayton, 1835); *Downfall of Babylon*, Oct. 29, 1836; “Maria Monk vs. Col. Stone,” *Haverhill Gazette*, November 19, 1836; “The Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Labor Hath Brought Forth a Jesuitical Hoax,” *Protestant Vindicator*, July 27, 1837.

Protestants.” This flurry of rebuttals suggests the significance of Stone’s critique and reveals the extent to which the controversy of Maria Monk escalated into a press war, with ever-increasing flashy, witty, and entertaining arguments.⁸¹

By early 1837, a major divide among Protestants over the story of Maria Monk became evident. The readership of the national publication, the *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, affiliated with Yale theologians, represented one contingent. In a twenty-page refutation, the *Christian Spectator* dismissed Monk as a “liar and fornicator” and criticized the “grotesque logic,” put forward by her supporters. According to the editors, not all who questioned Monk’s story were “panderers of popery and aids to the devil.” The editors also chastised Monk’s supporters for the way in which they allowed the controversy to cause a rift within the Protestant community. “With such Protestantism,” lamented the editor of the *Christian Spectator*, “we have no communion.” This is not to say that such writers for the *Christian Spectator* were not anti-Catholic. One of the editors declared the paper to be an “uncompromising opponent of Romanism.” Yet, the editors encouraged their readers to convert their Catholic counterparts through “love” rather than vitriol. This varied Protestant response to Maria Monk reveals two sides of anti-Catholicism, one sympathetic, though condescending, and the other militant.⁸²

The debate also divided Protestants along national lines. Rev. G. W. Perkins, one of the first investigators of the Hotel Die, minister of the Presbyterian Church in Montreal, and active member of Montreal Bible Society, lamented being the subject of

⁸¹ *Protestant Vindicator*, Nov. 16, 1836, and Nov. 23, 1836; Laughton Osborn, *Vision of Rubeta: An Epic Story of the Island of Manhattan, with Illustrations done on Stone* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, and Company, 1838), American Antiquarian Society; Autodocus, *A Critique of the Vision of Rubeta: A Dramatic Sketch in One Act* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Trade, 1838), AAS; response from the American Tract Society printed in Slocum, *Confirmation of Maria Monk’s Disclosures*, 85.

⁸² “Maria Monk and Her Impostures,” *Quarterly Christian Spectator*.

“the most unfair and slanderous abuse by various papers in the United States.” Indeed most American Protestant supporters of Monk dismissed all Canadian Protestants as being deluded by the influence of Rome. In response to such accusations and the heightened popularity of *Awful Disclosures*, Protestants in Montreal “of all denominations,” convened to formally address the issue. They stated their unanimous rejection of Maria Monk’s “fabrications,” and their “indignation and astonishment” at the prevailing belief in *Awful Disclosures* in the United States. To be sure, the indignation among Montreal Protestants also stemmed from a defensive posture toward anti-Canadian sentiment. *Awful Disclosures* did much to further that prejudice and thus deepen the divide Protestants along national boundaries.⁸³

Throughout the conflict, the Catholic response to the controversy was quick and decisive, but not as thorough as that of the Protestants, in favor or against. Most Catholic papers reprinted the Montreal affidavits under the title, “Maria Monk’s ‘Awful Disclosures,’ Villainy Exposed!!!” The *Boston Pilot*, a Catholic weekly, accused *Awful Disclosures* of being a “mere copy” from an older European book entitled, *The Gates of Hell Opened, A Development of the Secrets of Nunneries* (1731). Even before the publication of *Awful Disclosures*, the *New York Catholic Diary* stayed abreast of anti-Catholic publications, tackling a number of articles in the *Protestant Vindicator* and various works by W. C. Brownlee. One of the most scathing attacks against *Awful Disclosures* in the *Diary* was in a letter to the editor. In March 1836, a letter by a U.S. Catholic priest, Fr. McMahon appeared in which he referred to *Awful Disclosures* as “the devil’s prayer book.” He called on “honest Americans” to consider the “facts” and

⁸³ Ibid. For more information on Protestant / Catholic relations in Canada, see Murphy and Perin, eds. *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

argued that Catholics had “reason [and] religion...in our favor.” That same year the *Catholic Telegraph* condemned Monk’s book as the “basest [of] lies.” While the Catholic response to Monk was undeniably critical, Protestants spent more time and energy either promoting or criticizing her book. Before the Civil War all book-length denunciations of Monk, apart from Jones’ work, were published by Protestants. It would not be until the second half of the century that Catholics would publish their own books to refute *Awful Disclosures*.⁸⁴

Toward the end of the summer of 1837, Monk suddenly disappeared from New York. Like her unusual visit to Dr. Robertson’s three years earlier, she again found herself on the doorsteps of a doctor’s home. This time, though, she was alone and in Philadelphia. Dr. Sleigh must have recognized her or at least the name when he opened his door to Maria Monk around ten o’clock in the morning on August 16. Otherwise he might not have invited her in to hear her story or sent for six other “distinguished citizens” to serve as witnesses. Disheveled and forlorn, Monk related to the gathered men a sad story and sought their mercy. She told them that she had sailed to Philadelphia from New York in the company of six priests who had artfully persuaded her to leave with them. Fr. Phelan, the alleged father of her child even promised to marry her. She also wanted to get away from her “Protestant protectors,” she explained, who “made well by my book” without proffering any of the rewards to her. “I find I have gone from Catholic Jesuits to Protestant Jesuits!” Monk exclaimed, bursting into tears.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *Catholic Diary*, *Boston Pilot*, and “From Father McMahon’s Letter to the Editor of the N. Y. *Catholic Diary* of March, 1836,” in Monk, “Appendix” in *Awful Disclosures*, 206, 210, 226 – 228; *The Catholic Telegraph*, Nov. 24, 1836.

⁸⁵ W. W. Sleigh, *An Exposure of Maria Monk’s Pretended Abduction and Conveyance to the Catholic Asylum, Philadelphia, by Six Priests, on the Night of August 15, 1837, with Numerous Extraordinary Incidents During her Residence in this City* (Philadelphia: T.K. and P.G. Collins’ Printers, 1837), 3-13.

After arriving in Philadelphia, Monk claimed, the priests and their captive took up residence at the Philadelphia Catholic Orphan Asylum. It was from this institution that Maria Monk fled from the priests after overhearing their breakfast conversation. With the New York bishop John Hughes presiding and providing the rum, the priests all cheered after one of them slammed down his pint and proclaimed, “Damn her! We’ve had enough trouble already!” Concerned with whether she had truly been abducted by priests and if her Protestant protectors had cheated her, Dr. Sleigh invited “Reverend Mr. Slocum”—one of said protectors and author of the rebuttal to Monk’s critics, entitled *Reply to the Priest’s Book, Denominated*—to help clear things up. When the Rev. arrived the following day, Sleigh was shocked by his “perfect indifference” and “unaccountable lukewarmness” regarding Monk’s welfare. When Sleigh asked Slocum what was to become of her, Slocum reportedly replied, “I don’t know what is to become of her and I don’t think she will have anything coming to her!” After his brief encounter with Slocum, who quickly thereafter returned to New York, Sleigh advised Monk to get legal advice.⁸⁶

With raised suspicions on all counts, Sleigh conducted his own investigation. The results from this, along with a description of his own interview with the runaway nun, Sleigh compiled in a book entitled, *An Exposure of Maria Monk’s Pretended Abduction and Conveyance to the Catholic Asylum, Philadelphia, by Six Priests, with Numerous Extraordinary Incidents During her Residence in this City*. Mrs. Davis, “a Protestant lady of high respectability and owner of a boarding house,” testified that a young woman giving the name “Miss Jane Howard” arrived at her house on August 15 fresh from a New York steamboat. “Miss Jane Howard,” attested Davis, “was Miss Maria Monk. I

⁸⁶ Sleigh, *An Exposure of Maria Monk’s Pretended Abduction and Conveyance to the Catholic Asylum, Philadelphia, by Six Priests, on the Night of August 15, 1837, with Numerous Extraordinary Incidents During her Residence in this City*, 14-18.

would at any time recognize the same lady.” Sleigh also interviewed the nuns who ran the Catholic Orphan Asylum in Philadelphia. The sisters confirmed that “a woman who matched the description of Maria Monk came to the Asylum” unaccompanied. The woman claimed that her husband had left her and wanted to know if she could work there as a seamstress, a domestic, anything. The nuns apparently turned her away, offering her neither work nor shelter. A third witness said he saw Monk alone on the boat from New York. It was he who suggested Mrs. Davis’s boarding house. Sleigh systematically built his case against Monk upon these statements, confirming still further that Bishop Hughes was in St. Louis at the time of Monk’s visit, and thus never said grace at the alleged breakfast.⁸⁷

Unlike Jones, who dismissed Maria Monk as “the prostitute,” Sleigh described her as a victim in need of help. As a physician, Sleigh confirmed Monk “incapable of taking proper care of herself.” He urged “those connected with her” to place her in “some Asylum,” where after a few years, “she might become a worthy member of society.” Sleigh voiced concern for Maria, her child, and society if she remained free to do as she pleased. “She cannot be more than twenty-one... She is a mother! What is now to become of her?” Sleigh demanded. He warned none could be safe while “such a person is at large.” She may next decide to publish *Awful Disclosures of Protestantism*. Thus Sleigh confirmed that the public needed protection from Monk and that Maria could not protect herself.⁸⁸

The last grand effort to salvage the popularity and credibility of Maria Monk appeared in the form of her second and final book: *Further Disclosures by Maria Monk*,

⁸⁷ Sleigh, 23-29.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 34 – 36.

Concerning the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal; also her visit to Nuns' Island, and Disclosures Concerning that Secret Retreat, published in 1837. The work represented a mix of the sensational themes present in the first book and a detailed courtroom-like defense. The first half of *Further Disclosures* offered an exhaustive, multi-layered, and confusing argument in support of Monk's story, with over four hundred pages delineating arguments against Monk followed by rebuttals to those arguments. The book then unveiled, "further disclosures" of the crimson corruptions of the nuns and priests of Canada, including a lengthy description of "Nuns' Island." Priests supposedly stored the young and most beautiful nuns on "Nuns' Island," located in the St. Lawrence River, and visited them for "criminal purposes" during their "holy retreat." The island also conveniently operated as a treatment center for the inevitable diseases incurred on such retreats. Despite the salacious details, *Further Disclosures* did not come close to unleashing the type of hysteria created by Monk's first book. Perhaps the public wearied of the controversy; or maybe Monk had simply lost credibility or appeal, a predictable fate of her celebrity.⁸⁹

On the heels of the incriminating investigations of *Awful Disclosures*, skeptics began seriously questioning Maria Monk's authorship of the book. If Monk was the feeble victim who received the rudiments of an education, as her book claimed, could she have published a two-hundred page manuscript? What's more, could she have published another two-hundred pages that same year in a revised edition that met every challenge published by her opponents and juxtaposed them with supportive articles and affidavits all while using persuasive and sarcastic rhetoric? The *New Hampshire Patriot* charged

⁸⁹ Maria Monk, *Further Disclosures by Maria Monk concerning the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal, also Her Visit to Nuns' Island, and discourses concerning that Secret Retreat, Preceded by a Reply to the Priest's Book, by Rev. J. J. Slocum* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1837).

Theodore Dwight with being “the actual author of the book.” Others pointed to Slocum as the real author. Slocum later admitted authoring the book, though he claimed Monk dictated the content. Later legal procedures suggested a large collaborative effort among Monk’s pastor “friends.” In November 1836 Hoyte jointly sued Monk and Slocum for a share of the profits. Soon after, Monk and Slocum brought a case against Harper and Brothers. The court ruled in favor of the publishing company, arguing that George Bourne took out a copyright that excluded Monk from profits.⁹⁰ Thus while Monk’s name allowed for the overnight popularity of *Awful Disclosures*, she secured no monetary gain from the exposure, and fell into greater disrepute over the authorship controversy.

In 1838 Monk gave birth to her second child. This time she blamed no priests. With her popularity dwindling, only the *Protestant Vindicator* came to her defense, attributing her pregnancy to a Jesuit conspiracy. Updates in the press on her whereabouts disappeared until 1847, when the Connecticut *Morning News* reported that the “notorious Maria Monk, whose gross and scandalous falsehoods...made so much noise a few years since,” was imprisoned for “grand larceny” in Sing-Sing, the New York state prison in Auburn. Among the first penitentiaries established, Sing-Sing provided an institutional model for dealing with criminals by enforcing their isolation from society, obedience, and labor. A year later the *Barre Patriot* informed readers that Monk’s “life of drunkenness” led her into the Alms House in New York. Just before her death in 1849, the Vermont *Weekly Eagle*, described Monk as “apparently in the last stages of an ill-spent life.” The “abandoned woman of New York,” as the author described her, “sunk to the grave,” alone and penniless in the “sick ward of the Blackwell’s Island Penitentiary” in New

⁹⁰ “Maria Monk,” *New Hampshire Patriot*, August 1, 1836; information on the court proceeding in New York *Observer*, November 26, 1836 as cited in Billington, “Maria Monk and Her Influence,” 287.

York. Within a few months of this article, Monk died at the young age of thirty-two. Her conditions strangely resembled those depicted of convent life in *Awful Disclosures*. She was alone, in a gloomy prison cell, under the guardianship of what was likely a callous overseer, a victim of a harsh life.⁹¹

Despite Maria Monk's quick and decisive fall from grace in the public eye, *Awful Disclosures* continued to sell well throughout the century. With little concern for the real Maria Monk, readers poured over the pages of *Awful Disclosures*. The illicit sex and sadism littered throughout the book contributed in part to its sensational success. The association of torture or pain with eroticism was a new development of the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries. New medical innovations, especially anesthesia—which treated pain as opposed to disease—and economic growth, which allowed for certain comforts in life unavailable to generations past, rendered pain an increasingly distant and avoidable phenomenon. In turn, reluctance to inflict pain and compassion toward suffering became hallmarks of civilization, while cruelty, and pain itself, became increasingly associated with barbarity and degeneracy. Seeing pain as somehow taboo lent it an erotic aura. The idea of pain as forbidden, horrible, and shocking made it a natural partner of pornography, defined as “a representation of sexual behavior with a deliberate violate of moral and social taboos.”⁹² Convent narratives, and none more than *Awful Disclosures*, took full advantage of the growing culture of pornographic pain.

⁹¹ New York *Observer*, Oct. 6, 1838; *American Protestant Vindicator*, April 28, 1841, quoted in Billington, “Maria Monk and Her Influence,” 295; *Morning News* (Connecticut), September 2, 1847. Sing-Sing was the New York State prison at Auburn, its nickname derived from its location in Ossining. For more on Sing-Sing, see Rothman, 79-108; *Barre Patriot* (Massachusetts), August 18, 1848; *Weekly Eagle* (Vermont), July 9, 1849.

⁹² Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995), 303-304; David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 6.

Reform literature, such as that by abolitionists and temperance advocates, often relied on graphic depictions of pain and suffering to stir readers' emotions of compassion. Slave narratives prominently featured bloody whipping scenes, descriptions of rape, and murder. But the line between using such depictions for humanitarian and entertainment reasons often blurred. Nineteenth century sensational writing gave way to what one author referred to as "flagellation mania." The Marquis de Sade, most famous for exploiting the pleasure of pain, transformed "dear, delicious pain" of sentimentalists into an "underground phantasmagoria of rape, incest, and murder." The association of convents with medieval asceticism rendered them highly adaptable settings for pornographic pain. All sorts of erotic literature of this era frequently referenced martyrdom, flagellation, and the Inquisition.⁹³ *Awful Disclosures* played into the growing appetite for pornographic pain by describing violent murder of nuns, infanticide, and severe penances, all with graphic details of blood, torn flesh, and broken bones, alongside details of sexual licentiousness. The presentation of the book, however, as reform literature, meant to reveal the truth and mobilize action, allowed most readers to enjoy *Awful Disclosures* without guilt.

Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk said more about the prevailing sentiments of society at the time than it did about the life of its alleged author. The best-selling book revealed society's growing interest in sensational literature, their appetite for anti-Catholicism, their suspicion of nuns and convent life, and prevalent concerns regarding gender roles and sexuality of women. Unmarried women, let alone a community of Catholic unmarried women, stood out among a public that increasingly valued

⁹³ The argument that reformers used graphic depiction of pain to stir on humanitarian aid comes from Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture"; Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, 231; Quote from Marquis de Sade cited in Morris, 231.

domesticity and women's role of wife and mother. Presenting a nightmarish world where single women endured sexual degradation, murdered their own offspring, and wasted away, contributing nothing to society, only reinforced the ideals of domesticity.

In the meantime, the real Maria Monk remained veiled from the public who projected onto her the role of either victim, villain, or pawn, depending on their response to *Awful Disclosures*. To be sure, Monk played all of those roles in various ways in reality. But the popularity and legacy of her book went far beyond her as a person in real time. It set off a bevy of similar convent narratives, allowing escaped nun tales to become a genre in their own right, and culminated with state-sponsored "Nunnery Committees" by the 1850s. Indeed, *Awful Disclosures* initiated a thorough campaign against nuns and convents in the U.S. that lasted well beyond the death of Maria Monk.

CHAPTER TWO

DOWNFALL OF BABYLON: THE BURNING OF THE CHARLESTOWN CONVENT AND THE BIRTH OF THE CONVENT NARRATIVE

No one can be forced into a convent here, but when once they have taken vows, let them not wish to escape; their efforts shall be in vain. –The American Nun, 1836

Two years before the appearance of Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, on the night of August 11, 1834, Louisa Goddard, a young student at the Mount Benedict Academy, could not fall asleep. It was Monday; she had just returned from a pleasant weekend visit with her family, and she missed them. She got out of her little bed in the large room she shared with over a dozen other girls her age who now slept soundly, and approached one of the tall windows. Careful not to make a noise, she lifted the sill allowing into the otherwise stuffy room a gentle summer breeze and a sweet smell from the fruit trees scattered below. Mount Benedict Academy of Charlestown, Massachusetts, a girls' school run by Ursuline nuns, was a formidable three-story red brick structure that sat on top a large hill on twenty-four acres of cultivated farm land. The thoughts of Louisa that night, whatever they were as she gazed out at the moonlit grounds, were suddenly interrupted by the shrill howling and whooping of male voices cutting through the still night. Among indecipherable huzzahs, she heard the words "Down with the Pope! Down with the Convent!"⁹⁴

None of the other girls stirred in their beds. A few moments passed before the shouts went up again, louder this time. Louisa strained to see where the voices might be coming from in the foggy darkness. She remembered the rumors of a mob planning to attack the convent, rumors dismissed by the mother superior. Alarmed she flew across the

⁹⁴ Louisa Goddard Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent. A Narrative of the Destruction by a Mob, of the Ursuline School on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, as Remembered by One of the Pupils* (Cambridge: Welch, Bigelow, and Company, 1877), 75-81.

room to the bed of the nearest sleeping girl, Elizabeth Williams, and began shaking her. At that moment, a brick flew into a window, shattering the sleep of the other girls. Sister Mary Austin, the nun in charge of that room, pushed open the heavy wooden door into the girls' room. Holding a lantern her hand shook as she whispered unsteadily, "Girls, don't be frightened, but you better dress yourselves." One by one, the sleepy and confused girls began to assemble their clothing, complaining of not being able to find the sleeve of a frock or of a petticoat dropping into a chamber pot. As they floundered in the dimly lit space, careful not to step on broken glass, the sounds of two gun shots caused some to cry and sent others into hysterics.⁹⁵

The mob outside the convent walls detested the presence of the Ursulines in their town and held special contempt for the mother superior. John Buzzell, the ringleader of the rioters, called her "the sauciest woman I ever heard talk." Their rage boiled over amidst growing rumors of nuns being imprisoned against their will by a tyrannical mother superior and scheming priests. They called the superior's name that night, in their inebriated state, demanding that she show herself and bring with her the innocent victims kept locked away in dungeons. As they repeatedly voiced their challenge, "using violent and threatening language," the superior herself finally threw open the main door of the

⁹⁵ Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent*, 81 – 82; "Letter from Mother St. Augustine O'Keefe to Rev. F. Flynn, June 17, 1887," *Historical Records and Studies* 4 (1906), 227; for histories of the Mount Benedict burning, see also George Hill Evans, *The Burning of the Mount Benedict Ursuline Community House*, Somerville Historical Monographs (Somerville, Mass.: Somerville Public Library, 1934); Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 135-145; Ray Allen Billington, "The Burning of the Charlestown Convent," *The New England Quarterly* 10 (March 1937): 4-24; Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, 3 vols. (New York: Pilot Publishing Co., 1944), 205-39; Jeanne Hamilton, "The Nunnery as Menace: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 35-65; and Daniel A. Cohen, "Passing the Torch: Boston Firemen, 'Tea Party' Patriots, and the Burning of the Charlestown Convent Riot," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (2004): 528-586.

convent. She confirmed the mob's worst view of her, as she ordered the rowdy lot to "Dismiss immediately!" as the Bishop had "twenty thousand Irishmen at his command in Boston" who would "whip all of you to the sea!"⁹⁶

Mary Anne Moffatt, or Mary Edmond St. George, the mother superior of the Ursuline nuns at Mount Benedict, came from Canada. She was a stout and stately woman who carried herself with a "royal uprightness" that "demanded deference from all who approached her." She was known to speak sharply to the other nuns, who like servants, always bowed before speaking to her. With impressive administrative skill, she oversaw all facets of life in the convent, from the spiritual well-being of the nuns, to the administration of the academy. Moffatt also managed a small crew of grounds keepers and repairmen who performed daily maintenance in the convent and tended its gardens. She was cultured and intelligent but also short-tempered and haughty, at one time reporting that it would be "a difficult matter for any man to control me." Her rejection of the era's female gender norms of the submissive woman drew growing ire from a number of Charlestown Protestants, already suspicious of the imposing convent in their town.⁹⁷

Despite another misgiving about convent life—that nuns lived too submissively, as virtual slaves of priests and bishops—the Ursulines exercised a great deal of

⁹⁶ "Statement by the Leader of the Know Nothing Mob, Destruction of the Charlestown Convent," *U.S. Catholic Historical Records and Studies*, Vol. 12, 1918, 66, in Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses*, 5; "Report" in *Documents Relating to the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown* (Boston: Reprinted by Samuel N. Dickinson, 1842), 13; Whitney, 86.

⁹⁷ Whitney, 10, 46; Schultz, *Fire and Roses*, 97; for remarks on Moffatt, see "The Black Nuns," *Boston Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 4 (September 1825): 184; Moffatt, "To the Editor," *Recorder* (September 18, 1834) as cited in Hamilton, 50; for comments on Moffatt's sometimes abrupt temperament, see "Letter from Mother St. Augustine O'Keefe to Rev. F. Flynn, June 17, 1887," *Historical Records and Studies* 4 (1906), 228; for a description of early nineteenth century American female gender norms, see Barbara Welter in "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-174; and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); for a historiography that challenges this analysis in some ways, see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9-39.

autonomy. While Bishop Joseph Benedict Fenwick formally supervised the community, the sisters lived mostly self-governed lives. They could pursue what might be termed careers, in nursing, teaching, and charitable work, made business transactions, elected their superiors or abbesses, and drafted their own constitution or rules governing the community. In most orders, nuns divided into two categories based on seniority: lay sisters and choir sisters. While lay sisters performed more of the menial duties in the convent, choir sisters operated more the liturgical functions and had more authority. Communities also consisted of novices (women preparing to take monastic vows) and servants who were not official members of the order. The daily operations of each member of the community functioned smoothly under the overarching jurisdiction of the mother superior.⁹⁸

Back inside the Academy that August night, Moffatt remained calm, retaining her usual collected and authoritative demeanor as she helped the sisters corral the young students. She instructed the older girls to take the hands of the younger ones. In orderly fashion the school girls followed each other through the broad halls, out the convent's back door, and into the balmy night air of the courtyard. Though understandably frightened and bewildered, the girls remained silent, arranging themselves in the dewy lawn at the convent's edge in their disheveled clothes. They watched as a series of shadowy figures loudly flooded into their school, following the flash of their torches from

⁹⁸ Moffatt quoted in Richard S. Fay, "An Argument before the Committee of the House of Representatives upon the Petition of Benedict Fenwick and Others," (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1835), 51; for useful work on the level of autonomy and distinctions experienced by nineteenth-century nuns in America, see Margaret Susan Thompson, "Women, Feminism, and the New Religious History: Catholic Sisters as a Case Study," in Philip R. Vandermeer and Robert P. Swierenga, eds. *Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History* (New Brunswick, 1991), 136-63; Thompson, "Sisterhood and Power: Class, Culture, and Ethnicity in the American Convent," *Colby Library Quarterly* 25 (Sept. 1989): 149-75; Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America: Variations on the International Theme* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), ; and James J. Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

one window to the next, into the rooms where they peacefully slept only minutes ago. As the mob overtook Mount Benedict, Mr. Cutter, one of the sisters' neighbors, and a few of his friends who had gathered to help, lifted the young girls over the railing to safety while the nuns crawled through an opening in the fence.⁹⁹

The Ursuline convent was originally established in Boston in 1820. There the nuns offered a free day school for Catholic girls, mostly from the families of impoverished Irish immigrants. After a number of the nuns died of tuberculosis during an epidemic in the 1820s, Bishop Benedict Fenwick, who had recently arrived in Boston as the city's second bishop, requested the help from the elite Ursuline community in Quebec, Canada. Among the nuns who came to aid the fledging community in Boston was Mary Anne Moffatt. She along with the Bishop, for whom the convent was named, moved the school to Charlestown and transformed it into a flourishing and elegant academy that catered more to members of the upper class than the previous school in Boston had. The city's elite citizens, mostly Unitarians who wished to secure a European-like education for their daughters, patronized Mount Benedict. The night of the attack against the convent, fifty girls resided at the Academy, forty from Protestant families and ten Catholics.¹⁰⁰ The prospect of the city's Protestant girls receiving an education in a Catholic institution raised suspicion among certain Protestants in Charlestown and neighboring towns who feared a Catholic conspiracy underway.

⁹⁹ Whitney, 96 – 103; "Letter from Mother St. Augustine O'Keefe to Rev. F. Flynn, June 17, 1887," *Historical Records and Studies* 4 (1906), 225; O'Keefe was a resident at Mount Benedict when the attack occurred and wrote to Rev. F. Flynn after Louisa Goddard's account of the attack was published to confirm or counter certain details therein.

¹⁰⁰ Schultz, 81; "Report," *Documents*, 10.

Although Mount Benedict occasionally accepted students without charge, by the 1820s and 1830s, the institution had strayed from its original mission as a day school for Catholic girls. Charging \$125 a year for each pupil, most Irish Catholic families could not even afford to send their daughters to Mount Benedict. Having received a privileged European-style education themselves, the Ursulines of Charlestown were “effective agents in the dissemination of genteel culture,” as historian Daniel Cohen put it. Indeed convent schools like Mount Benedict were among the few places where girls could receive an advanced education. In addition to “useful knowledge,” students at Mount Benedict took classes in needlework, drawing, painting, languages, and music—all trappings of refinement. The Academy further required young ladies to enter Mount Benedict with items that denoted status, including “six napkins, six towels, one knife and fork, one silver goblet, one silver dessert and tea spoon, and two pairs of sheets and pillowcase.”¹⁰¹ As the Ursuline community grew in status, resentment among some laboring Charlestown citizens developed as well.

Yet far from ladies of leisure, the pupils of the Mount Benedict labored under rigorous educational requirements. Following the French education style, the girls received daily marks and regular status reports on their academic achievement. They studied geometry, chemistry, geography, history, rhetoric, mythology, moral philosophy, and composition in addition to other studies. Nor did the students’ black frock, hood, and hose uniform denote any sort of indulgence. The parents of some of the more pampered

¹⁰¹ “Prospectus,” original in Archives of Catholic University of America, cited in Hamilton, “Nunnery as Menace,” 41; for a description of the education received at Mount Benedict, see Daniel A. Cohen, “The Respectability of Rebecca Reed,” *Society for Historians of the Early Republic* 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1996), 427; Mary J. Oates, “Catholic Female Academies on the Frontier,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 12 (Fall 1994): 124-130; and Margaret M. McGuinness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 71-72.

girls even saw the simple clothes, diet, and routine as a “blessing” that offset the “dazzling influences of high life.”¹⁰²

The group of men that descended on the Charlestown convent on August 11 consisted of sailors, brick-makers, firemen, and rabble-rousers. While many were poor and uneducated, the mob represented a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds. Most of the men performed strenuous manual labor for a dollar or two each day in the brickyards that surrounded the convent while the wealthy members of neighboring towns sent their daughters to receive an expensive education from the Ursulines. They equated their dwindling fortunes—mostly the result of industrialism and immigration—with the growing presence of Catholics in their vicinity, and no one stood out as much as the Ursulines of Mount Benedict. Many of the men had either left families behind in search of work or were unmarried. The enclosure of a group of unavailable single women, many of a young marrying age, may have also served as a source of frustration for members of the mob. “They were a socially submerged group,” wrote a historian of the event in 1934, “leading plodding and monotonous lives with no stake in community welfare.” As such, he concluded, they “became reckless and willing tools in the excitement of the moment.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² “The Black Nuns,” *Boston Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 4 (Sept. 1825), 184; Letter of Abraham R. Thompson, reprinted in Mary Anne Ursula Moffatt’s *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent, Exposing Its Falsehoods and Absurdities* (Boston: J. H. Eastburn, 1835), 53-4.

¹⁰³ Daniel A. Cohen, “Miss Reed and the Superiors: The Contradictions of Convent Life in Antebellum America,” *Journal of Social History* (Fall 1996), 162; Evans, *The Burning of the Mount Benedict Community*, 7. For more on the economic decline in Boston and neighboring cities in the 1830s, see Peter R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860: A Study in City Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). Knights calculated that Boston’s skilled workers were twice as likely to experience economic decline than advancement through the 1830s, and that percentages were worse for unskilled workers.

Firemen from Boston Engine Company No. 13 also participated in the burning of the convent. Unlike their brick-laying counterparts, these men enjoyed more social prestige and economic standing. While most histories of the Mount Benedict riot resort to a class analysis to explain the event, the firemen's association complicates the story. One of the most recent and thorough historians of the event, Daniel A. Cohen, examined the Boston firemen's participation in the burning of the convent. He pointed to ways in which 1830s mob violence often sprang from revived memories of the American Revolution and not simply class conflict. Renderings of revolutionary resistance, such as the Boston Tea Party, often served to legitimize violent, collective action in the Jacksonian era, a time of considerable political, religious, and economic unrest. Hyper-patriotic sentiments united people from various economic backgrounds against one perceived common enemy. Reflecting this trend, the burning of the Ursuline Convent brought together various classes and groups who joined forces against Catholic sisters.¹⁰⁴

That night, after finishing drinks at a local tavern, the rioters covered their faces in paint, reminiscent of their "Boston Tea Party" forebears. Entering the convent grounds, they hollered in revolutionary rhetoric, "Down with the Pope! Down with Tyranny!" The mob inaugurated their attack by tearing down the convent fence and lighting a giant bonfire with the posts and tar barrels. Soon flames lit up the sky that could be seen from miles around. In response, a steady trickle of Charleston citizens, an estimated 4,000, emerged to witness the scene. At the time Charlestown consisted of about 10,000, while

¹⁰⁴ Cohen, "Passing the Torch: Boston Firemen, 'Tea Party' Patriots, and the Burning of the Charlestown Convent," 527-586; see also Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); and Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Boston contained roughly 72,000 people.¹⁰⁵ Yet news spread quickly to the rest of the nation of the small town's monumental outrage.

A few firemen arrived on the scene. They watched motionless as manic men danced around a large bonfire. According to Louisa Goddard, "they [even] seemed to give the rioters sudden courage". As the firemen stood by, the mob rushed into the Academy. None of the firemen turned on their hoses and some even joined the mob. After selectmen of the town received word of the riot, they deferred to the police. Yet the police force, which consisted of one part-time officer—a common predicament of police forces in the Jacksonian era—could do little to stop the unfolding events. As most towns lacked an equipped police force, citizens often responded to social, political, economic, and religious tensions through extra-legal means. The majority of towns merely had "watchmen" who looked out for fires and patrolled streets at night with a bell to announce the hour. The events at Mount Benedict in August contributed to the replacement of Charlestown's watchmen with a police force and revealed widespread hostility toward the Ursuline community.¹⁰⁶

By midnight members of the mob could be seen running back and forth through the building. They went through drawers and trunks, breaking furniture, and tossing pieces into giant heaps in the middle of rooms. They broke open doors inside the building with clubs and hurled musical instruments from the great music room out the window,

¹⁰⁵ "Report," 13; Schultz, 3-5; numbers from Evans, *The Burning of the Mount Benedict Community*, 3, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Whitney, 93; Hamilton, "Nunnery as Menace," 43; Evans, 9; for studies on mob violence and rioting in early America, see David Grimstead, *American Mobbing, 1826-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Theodore Hammett, "Two Mobs of Jacksonian Boston: Ideology and Interest," *Journal of American History* 62 (March 1976): 845-68; Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 108-120; Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Gilje, *Rioting in America*.

including carefully crafted guitars and harps. They even managed to drop a piano from a window, which “fell with a crash distinctly audible above all other sounds.” On top of the large piles of furniture, they heaped Bibles, crosses, vestments, and altar decorations before torching them all. An hour and a half later, onlookers gazed in wonder as the entire building was engulfed in billowing flames.¹⁰⁷

From there, the mob turned from the convent to the mausoleum in the garden. Dressed mockingly now in the uniforms of the students, the disheveled crew ripped open a little trap door to the miniature brick mausoleum that housed the bodies of deceased nuns and scrambled down the narrow steps. The gowned men yanked corpses out of coffins, jovially animating them and yanking out teeth for souvenirs. They then stormed the bishop’s cottage, which sat on the grounds of Mount Benedict. Bishop Benedict was not there that night to watch as a New Hampshire resident of the mob put on a mock auction of his library before tossing each book into the fire that eventually consumed the building. The mob transformed the Edenic lush gardens of Mount Benedict—their final object of destruction—into an inferno, trampling the grounds, digging their axes into fruit trees, and yanking the ripening grape vines from the trellises. The vigor of the pack by this time began to tamper off, after almost seven straight hours of mayhem.¹⁰⁸

Just before the mob dispersed, two members found a mahogany tabernacle hidden beneath a bed of asparagus. One of the nuns hoped to secure the valuable vessel’s safety there just before the men broke into the convent. Inside the vessel they discovered a silver

¹⁰⁷ John England, “Documents Relating to the Burning of the Charlestown Convent, The Imposture of Rebecca Reed, The Boston Riots, Etc.,” *Works of the Right Rev. John England, First Bishop of Charleston* vol. 5, ed. Sabastian G. Messmer (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1849), 252; Whitney, 105; Schultz, 5-6; Hamilton, 43.

¹⁰⁸ “Letter from Mother St. Augustine O’Keefe to Rev. F. Flynn, June 17, 1887,” *Historical Records and Studies*, 226; Schultz, 6-7; Hamilton, 48; “Report,” 16.

chalice holding consecrated bread—the body of Christ according to Catholic theology. In feigned reverence, Henry Creesy, a wagon-hand from New Hampshire, lifted the chalice as a priest might before stuffing a few of wafers into his pocket and letting others scatter to the ground, before hurling the silver vessel high into the night sky. As it landed somewhere in the thick shrubs that hedged the convent grounds, his associate grumbled that he was a damned fool for disposing of something so valuable.¹⁰⁹ As the sun rose the shadowy figures dispersed, but the scattered flames from the building flickered on amidst rising smoke and desolation. All the while, hundreds of townspeople stood stunned. The firemen had gone home. The magistrate could not be found. Though many were deeply disturbed by the scene, no one had acted to stop the burning of the convent.

Two weeks before the rioters unleashed their wrath against the convent, rumors circulated around Charlestown and Boston of an escaped nun from Mount Benedict. Elizabeth Harrison, known as Sister Mary John, worked as the school's music teacher. At the end of July she suffered from "a nervous excitement or fever" from the arduous task of giving fourteen music lessons a day. After the convent's annual fête, during which she strenuously labored on top of regular duties in the suffocating summer heat, she became bed-ridden with severe headaches. Days later, she walked out of the convent building, supposedly in a state of delirium, and sought refuge at the Cutter house, Protestant neighbors of Mount Benedict. She told Mr. Edward Cutter she would never return to the convent, and when they sent for Bishop Fenwick, she refused to see him.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ "Letter from Mother St. Augustine O'Keefe," 223, 227; Schultz, 6-8.

¹¹⁰ "Report," 12; *Supplement to Six Months in a Convent* in *Six Months in a Convent*, in Rebecca Reed, *Six Months in a Convent* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne & Metcalf, 1835), 73-89; Edward Cutter, "Letter to the Editor," *Independent Inquirer* 1, issue 49 (Vermont, August 16, 1834), 2.

After finally consulting with Harrison, the bishop convinced her to return with him to Mount Benedict. Although the mother superior and the bishop later claimed that Harrison suffered from “fever of the brain” and derangement, the city quickly buzzed with rumors that Harrison had gone mad under the harsh rule of the superior who had kept her chained up in the convent’s cellar. Just as she was finally able to achieve a desperate escape and find refuge, some speculated, the powerful bishop secured her return through threats. When she neglected to leave the convent once more, some city residents theorized that Harrison had been imprisoned, removed to another country, or even murdered.¹¹¹

It was not only Charlestown that stirred with the story of Harrison’s “escape.” Neighboring towns and cities printed reports of the story. A number of New England papers ran the story with the intriguing headline “Mysterious.” When Harrison did not reappear after returning to the convent, papers reported that “much alarm is extended in consequence.” Two days before the riot against the convent, the superior received several anonymous envelopes with clips of the article enclosed, to which she refused to respond. A committee later commissioned to investigate the burning of the convent, claimed that it was under the influence of the beliefs about Harrison that “the conspirators were led to design the destruction of the convent.”¹¹²

After the burning of Mount Benedict, an investigative committee confirmed that Harrison had not been murdered and was not being held against her will. Edward Cutter, who visited Harrison after her return to the Ursuline community, reiterated the

¹¹¹ Whitney, 18; Report,” 8.

¹¹² See for instance, “Convent at Charlestown,” *Boston Recorder* 19, no. 33 (August 15, 1834); and “Mysterious,” *Mercantile Journal* (August 1834); England, “Documents Relating to the Burning of the Charlestown Convent,” 243, 245; “Report,” 8.

committee's statement, reporting that Harrison told him she was free to leave the convent if she wished. After Harrison's return her physician, Dr. Thompson, ordered her to rest as much as possible and refrain from seeing any visitors. A few days before the burning, Selectmen—members of the local government in New England—of Charlestown visited the convent to investigate rumors about Harrison's imprisonment. They warned the superior about the possibility of a mob attack and requested to examine the cellars to prove to the public that no one was being tortured. Anti-Catholic propaganda often claimed that convent cellars were "places of torment and iniquity," hidden from the public eye. Moffatt, however, grew indignant at their request. After "overwhelming them with a torrent of invectives," she dismissed them from the premises. When the other nuns asked the superior about the mob, she told them it was the duty of the Selectmen to protect and not interrogate them and that they had nothing to worry about. The following day an account of the superior's rude reception of the Selectmen appeared in the papers instead of a refutation of the existence of tortured nuns in the convent cellar.¹¹³

In addition to the rumors of escaped nuns, growing sectarian conflict among Protestants and Catholics contributed to the uprising against Mount Benedict. Lyman Beecher, the great revivalist minister and patriarch of the Beecher clan, delivered a series of anti-Catholic lectures in New England towns, including Charlestown, just months before the burning. One contemporary source listed his "inflammatory sermons," in which "the Devil and the Pope of Rome were never introduced without the other," among the causes of the attack. Beecher alarmed his listeners with talk of a conspiracy underway by Catholic European powers to topple American liberties. If they were not designing

¹¹³Cutter, "Letter to the Editor," *Independent Inquirer*; 2; "Report," 10; England, 243; Whitney, 55-57.

against us, he asked his listeners, why would they “pay the passage and empty upon our shores such floods of pauper immigrants?” Such immigrants provided a veritable “army of soldiers” ready to sap the “property and moral virtue of the nation.”¹¹⁴

Beecher “fiercely denounced convents,” warning especially against the cunning designs of Catholic education. Why else would Catholics “offer education to Protestant children...while thousands of Catholic children [remained] neglected and uncared for?” He pointed to the spread of the Sisters of Charity, who operated schools and orphanages in nine U.S. cities by that time. Though they claimed not to proselytize, the fact that they “prohibited free thought,” had no “Protestant books,” and received funds from Europe suggested otherwise. Beecher chastised “reckless Protestant parents” who entrusted their children and thus the welfare of the nation to the care of “Jesuits and nuns.” He even urged his daughter, Catherine Beecher, to pursue the education of young girls “in which Catholics and infidels have got the start of us.” The growing prosperity of some of these institutions, warned Beecher, evidenced the imminent dangers of popery. When his listeners in Charlestown and its vicinity heard these words, they invariably pictured the towering Mount Benedict. It was time to “wake up!” he roared, to invest in Protestant schools, and regard the “reality of the danger” before it was too late.¹¹⁵

The growing presence of Catholics in the 1830s, especially in New England, gave Beecher’s warning great weight. In 1807 only 70,000 Catholics resided in the United States. By 1830 there were 74,000 in New England alone. Their presence was especially concentrated in the Boston diocese. Most of the newcomers were Irish, counting for one-

¹¹⁴ England, 232; Lyman Beecher’s three sermons were reprinted in Lyman Beecher, D. D., *Plea for the West* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, & Co., 1835), 54 – 56.

¹¹⁵ Beecher, *Plea for the West*, 127; England, 232; Beecher, *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. Barbara Cross (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), II, 167-8.

third of American immigration in the 1830s. Immigration to the United States spiked after one of the coldest European winters on record in 1829, which plagued the poor with food shortages the following spring. In 1832 sixty thousand newcomers poured into the country. Each year throughout the decade just as many and sometimes more continued to arrive. Even before this unprecedented increase in immigration, the Catholic presence in the U.S. became more conspicuous with the Papal Jubilation celebrated in America in 1827 and the decree to form new parochial schools in the country in 1829 after the First Provincial Council of Baltimore. The Council not only set the tone for the American Catholic Church but also testified to the growing presence and stature of the church in the U.S.¹¹⁶

Nuns and convents were among the most conspicuous indications of a growing Catholic presence. Between 1790 and 1803 there were only two convents in the U.S., the Ursulines of New Orleans and the Carmelites of Maryland. Ten different orders of religious sisters were established between 1804 and 1832, including the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and three convents in Kentucky. The Sisters of Charity was perhaps the most popular. Founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton, an American-born Catholic convert, the order established the first parochial schools in America and spread to multiple cities as the sisters of the order opened orphanages, schools, and hospitals. By 1832 the Sisters of Charity came to Boston from Emmitsburg to open an orphanage. Their presence alongside the arrival of the second bishop of Boston, Benedict Fenwick

¹¹⁶ Statistics listed in David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, revised and updated (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 28-30; see also *The Statistical History of the United States* (Stamford, Conn.: Fairfield Publishers, 1865), ser. C88-114, p. 57; and William J. Bromwell, *History of Immigration to the United States* (New York: Redfield, 1856), 21-123; for more on the First Provincial Council of Baltimore, see Peter Guilday, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792-1919* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1923), 28-45.

and the establishment of the Ursulines in Charlestown, marked significant growth of the city's Catholic diocese and the extension of an Old World vocation for the nation's women.¹¹⁷

A heightened degree of anti-Catholicism grew up alongside the growing Catholic presence in the U.S. To ward off the spread of Rome in America, Protestants formed the Home Missionary Society in 1826, the Protestant Reformation Society a year later, and the New York Protestant Association in 1830, among other groups. Members of the Home Missionary Society declared their commitment to battling “the combined forces of Infidelity and Popery” in the American West and sent devoted missionaries into the nation's frontier to do just that. The New York Protestant Association sponsored public meetings on topics such as “Is Popery That Babylon the Great Which John the Evangelist Has Described in the Apocalypse?” and “Is Popery Compatible with Civil Liberty?” Attendance at these bi-weekly sessions ranged anywhere from about three hundred to fifteen hundred people. These groups attempted to organize national anti-Catholicism in a way similar to other benevolent associations of the era. They also advanced the American crusade against convents, denouncing them repeatedly as immoral and un-American.¹¹⁸

Especially suspicious of the seclusion to which nuns committed their lives, Catholic critics speculated about likely abuses that occurred against nuns, shut up from the public eye and the “sympathies of society.” The idea of an institution being “closed” or “secretive” seemed undemocratic and dangerous. A deeply ingrained prejudice against

¹¹⁷ Karen M. Kennelly, “Women Religious in America,” *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*, Michael Glazier and Thomas J. Shelley, eds. (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 1489-1491.

¹¹⁸ Statistics cited in Thomas T. McAvoy, C.S.C., *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 133; for information on these and other Protestant societies, see Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 37-42; and Leo P. Hirrell, *Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 114.

celibacy only heightened this suspicion. Since the Reformation, many Protestants had viewed celibacy as unnatural and un-Christian. Protestant Yankees revived these arguments as their shores began to fill with nuns and priests from the Old World. They believed that celibacy turned men into sexual animals, who after a time of restraint became overwhelmed with inordinate passions. Priests could thus not be trusted to oversee wards of women locked up from the rest of society.¹¹⁹ While these suspicions found expression in the popular press and private conversations, the mob that attacked the Charlestown convent was the first group to take serious action.

Convent propaganda rightly warned that once a woman took religious vows, she would be cut off from contact with family and friends. Most religious constitutions severely restricted, if not prohibited, communication with members' former relations. The intention behind this practice was to foster a communal identity among the sisters and to "strip away" worldly associations. But outsiders were suspicious. If relatives and friends had no access to their associate nun, how could they be sure she was safe? How could they be sure of anything regarding her well-being? Yet American orders, including the Charlestown Ursulines, were often more flexible in this rule than their European counter-parts as they adjusted to the American milieu. And anyone under the care of nuns, as patients or students, could certainly see visitors whenever they wished.¹²⁰

English and Anglo-American hostility toward Irish Catholics in particular dated back to the end of the seventeenth century, when England conquered Ireland. Afterward

¹¹⁹ "Report," 9; for works on American Protestant criticism of celibacy, see Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (Winter, 1999): 97-128.

¹²⁰ For more on the rule of enclosure in American convents, see Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America*, 88.

the English developed penal laws, ensuring that the Irish remained a defeated people of second-class citizens. These laws stripped Catholics of most of their property, forbid Catholic education (unless in state sponsored schools with a distinctly Protestant curriculum), and prohibited Catholics from bearing arms, holding public office, or entering well-paid professions. Priests faced the threat of imprisonment, castration, and sometimes execution. As a result, the nation became steeped in poverty, characterized by mud shanties and jugged roads, which would last for close to two hundred years.

Moreover, most Irish Catholics shunned public schools, resulting in a dramatic literacy gap along religious lines. In the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke described the world that grew out of the Penal Law system as the most horrific “contrivance for the impoverishment and degradation of the people...as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.”¹²¹ By the 1800s it was easy for English and American Protestants to attribute the dire conditions of the Shanty Irish simply to the influence of their “backward” religion, which they believed confined the masses in ignorance, poverty, disease, and corruption.

A few days after the burning of Mount Benedict, Charlestown and Boston held emergency meetings. At Faneuil Hall city officials appointed a committee of twenty-eight respected city residents to investigate the burning. Theodore Lyman, Jr., mayor of Boston, nominated committee members who from the outset acknowledged a reluctance to “aid in the dissemination of the Catholic faith” or attempt to justify the actions of the mob. By the end of September, the committee interviewed over 140 citizens. In the

¹²¹ T. W. Moody and W. E. Vaughn, eds., *A New History of Ireland*, vols. 3-4 *Early Modern Ireland, 1534-1691* and *Eighteenth Century Ireland, 1691-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Edmund Burke quoted in Marie and Connor Cruise O’Brien, *A Concise History of Ireland* (New York: Beekman House, 1972), 78.

resulting “Report,” they denounced the burning as a “base and cowardly act for which the perpetrators deserve the contempt and detestation of the community.” The causes they cited included the popular belief that the convent was a place of “cruelty, vice, and corruption” and pointed to the stories spread about the escape of Elizabeth Harrison. Attempting to dispel these rumors, the report claimed that none of the nuns were forcibly detained. Likewise, “no penances or punishments [we]re ever forcibly enforced or inflicted.” As for the students, they were “wholly unrestrained in their communications with their friends concerning all that transpired in the seminary.” Protestant students were not influenced to accept the Catholic faith by their instructors. Finally the report detailed the events of the burning of the convent and calculated the cost of damage to be about \$50,000.¹²² The condemnatory tone of this announcement, however, did not reflect public sentiment in the aftermath of the burning or the tenor of the eventual trial.

What turned out to be a very public and sensational trial on the burning of the convent was held in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On September 14, 1834, the alleged leader of the mob, John R. Buzzell, stood accused of arson, “entering with intent to steal” and “entering with intent to burn.” Each of the offenses was punishable by death. Citizens of the town quickly mobilized to support Buzzell and others accused. That Buzzell and his compatriots did not run away before being summoned suggests the degree to which they felt secure in the prospect of acquittal. In a display of solidarity days before the trial, Buzzell’s supporters freely passed handbills that threatened anyone who dared testify against members of the mob. “All persons giving information in any shape or testifying in court against anyone concerned in the late affair at Charlestown may expect

¹²² “Report,” 1-20, 10-11, 14-20; Hamilton, “Nunnery as Menace,” 46.

assassination according to the oath which bound the party to each other,” stated the bill. Later, in a petition on behalf of the Ursuline Community, Judge Richard Fay wrote that supporters of Buzzell and the other rioters “considered [them] martyrs to the cause of true religion” and “filled their pockets” with subscriptions.¹²³

What was supposed to be an examination of the accused, turned out to be an interrogation of the tenets of Catholicism and monastic life. Mary Anne Moffatt was the first called to witness. Her appearance in the court, “in the costume of her order,” and her explanation that the nuns sometimes referred to her as “president,” likely chafed against the jury’s Yankee sensibilities. Upon further questioning, she dispelled rumors that the sisters ever called her “*divine* Mother” or prostrated themselves in her presence. She also defended the community against accusations regarding the Bible, explaining that indeed the nuns were allowed to read the Bible, “when and where they pleased.” In response to the query of whether “two nuns ever slept in the same bed,” she answered in the negative. Subject to the same type of scrutiny, Bishop Fenwick explained the Catholic rationale behind the practice of confession and priestly celibacy.¹²⁴ By focusing on criticisms of Catholicism and convents, the defense attorney deftly redirected the purpose of the trial away from examining the defendants.

Of the thirteen arrested accomplices in the burning of the convent, only two identified John Buzzell as the leader of the mob. Others equivocated. Peter Rossetter, an Irish groundskeeper at the convent, however, pointed at Buzzell, testifying that days before the burning the man had “said something about a woman...and beat me up as

¹²³ Evans, 15; England, 234, 257; Ephraim Tucker, “The Burning of the Ursuline Convent,” *Collections of the Worcester Society of Antiquities*, IX (1890), 40-41; Fay, “An Argument before the Committee of the House of Representatives upon the Petition of Benedict Fenwick and Others,” 36.

¹²⁴ England, 248.

much as he pleased.” Henry Buck, a nineteen year old accomplice, also identified Buzzell and described the attack. With little help from the witnesses, Mr. Austin, the prosecuting attorney, faced the jury on the third day of the trial to offer his closing remarks. “You yourselves are now on your own trial,” he told the men of the jury. “The events of this transaction will be recorded in the history of the country... It will be ascertained by your decision whether the tribunals of justice are to be temples consecrated to truth, or whether their solemnity is to be influenced and swayed by the dictates of prejudice, ignorance, and popular despotism.” Austin expressed doubts that the arbitrators of justice would be able to “separate from your minds preconceived opinions...to give an impartial verdict.” He then appealed to the victimization of the nuns of Mount Benedict, who were but “feeble women,” and the occupation they performed, “the most praiseworthy occupation of educating children.” He concluded with an appeal to the rights of citizenship, “that guarantees protection to individuals professing every shade of belief” and of their property.¹²⁵

The defense attorney, Mr. Farley, addressed the jury next. He appealed to widespread rumors that women there were imprisoned against their will and tortured within the convent. If these rumors were not true, “if the institution had not been corrupt,” he argued, then “fifteen or twenty thousand citizens would not have suffered a few individuals to destroy it.” To be sure, it was not merely the hand of the mob that destroyed the convent, but the citizens, including the fire department and city magistrates who stood by. Writing one hundred years after the event, historian George Evans, expressed a similar view, placing blame both on the “reckless mob” and on elite anti-

¹²⁵ England, 253 – 254.

Catholic citizens, whom “under the cloak of respectability furnished a stimulus for lawlessness.” While the influence of “respectable men” cannot be fully measured, propaganda and rumors denigrating Catholicism and the Ursuline Community surely contributed to the burning of Mount Benedict. The mob’s actions were not spontaneous. Benjamin Wilbur, one of the convent rioters, later confessed on his deathbed that the attack had been planned well before the event. The Boston Committee, likewise, mentioned conspirators who “designed the destruction” but excused themselves from the perpetration of the violence.¹²⁶

Before taking his seat, the defense attorney appealed to popular ethnic prejudice, claiming that his client could only be convicted on “foreign and imported testimony.” The next day, the jury voiced their solidarity with the defense in their verdict “Not Guilty,” and John Buzzell was a free man. At this pronouncement, the courtroom burst into cheers, “and the house for a few minutes resounded with claps and stampings of the assembly.” Apart from one accomplice, the rest of the accused were also acquitted. Marvin Marcy, Jr., one of the youngest members of the mob, was sentenced to life in prison. In response, citizens, including Bishop Fenwick, petitioned for this “scapegoat’s” release. Moffatt, in an effort to “supplicate the governor for his release,” wrote a letter on behalf of Marcy, stating that “he was young, and joined in the riot for *sport*, as many other boys would do.” After seven months, city judges let Marcy go. The damages done to the convent, the value of which belonging “equally to each member of the community” and the personal property of the pupils, however, were never repaid.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Evans, 7; Lord, Sexton, and Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, Vol. II, 234-5; “Report,” 8. For more on mob violence in the early America, see note 13.

¹²⁷ Evans, 18; England, 255, 257, 248; Fay, “An Argument before the House of Representatives,” 50; Sr. Mary St. George to Dr. Hooker, February 25, 1834 (Mass. State Archives, Pardons, 1835, M. Marcy), Lord

On behalf of Bishop Fenwick and the Ursuline Community, including parents of some of the former residents, Richard S. Fay, a Probate Judge, presented a pamphlet petition to the court's ruling that acquitted the convent rioters. Despite being a Protestant himself, Fay took up the cause of defending the Ursuline community because he believed that the accused were "undeniably guilty." After attempting to dispel certain misconceptions of "some of the tenets of the Roman Catholic faith," Fay sought to move beyond arguments based on "religious or sectarian grounds," presenting his case to "liberal and enlightened members of every religious denomination." He began his argument by describing the character and institution of the Ursuline order, praising their efforts in education and charity, and writing that they "have nothing to conceal." The violence launched against them, he maintained, sprung from "a deplorable ignorance and delusion."¹²⁸

It was to be presumed, Fay continued, that the Ursuline community was an innocent party. No charges had been brought against them, not even by those who accused them the loudest of criminal deeds before the burning of the convent. They are "good citizens of the Commonwealth, obedient to the laws and paying all taxes and duties levied upon them," and thus "entitled to full protection under the law." The government "wantonly violated" this contract by disregarding the community's "right to property" and the "right to be protected." Fay appealed to his readers' "patriotism," urging them not to see their country's beloved laws "degraded and trampled." Though "public opinion was against Catholics," Fay encouraged the State to remember that "the Catholic is as much under your protection as the Protestant." He then closed his argument

Papers, archives of the Archdiocese of Boston, cited in Schultz, 227-8. The Ursulines who were American citizens and the bishop held the Mount Benedict property in trust; see Hamilton, 40.

¹²⁸ Fay, "An Argument," 36, 14, 17, 21, 19, 22, 33.

by lamenting the destitution and poverty the Ursulines suffered, who, as a result of the burning, had no home or recourse.¹²⁹

A number of others came forward, publically denouncing the violence enacted against the Ursuline community at Mount Benedict. Many cast the burning as simply “uncivilized.” Fay wrote that “the scenes of Indian barbarity never succeeded the ferocious conduct of the Convent rioters.” One of the parents of a Mount Benedict pupil likewise condemned the “intolerant and lawless spirit” of the rioters which was altogether “hostile to the spirit of our civil and religious institutions.” The *Boston Evening Transcript* quickly condemned the event as “a cool, deliberate, systematized piece of brutality, unprovoked...totally unjustifiable, and visiting the citizens of the town...with indelible disgrace.”¹³⁰ These unequivocal reactions, condemnatory as they were, paid little attention to the atmosphere of anti-Catholicism and intolerance that contributed to the burning of Mount Benedict. It was perhaps easier to cast the rioters as brutal, uncivilized monsters, than to consider the role of elite and seemingly good citizens.

Many Protestant parents who had sent their children to the Mount Benedict Academy also spoke out. “I am not a Catholic, nor do I expect to be,” wrote one parent, but “I sent my children there because I thought and still think it [Mount Benedict] stood among the first schools in the country.” Another parent stated, “I have understood that no attempt was made to influence [the Protestant children’s] religious tenets; the children are permitted to attend worship in the chapel or to decline it, if their parents wished.” “The instructors never attempted to introduce or instill their own views of religion into the

¹²⁹ Fay, “An Argument,” 21, 19, 22, 33, 37, 41; for more background information on Judge Fay, see William T. Davis, *Bench and Bar of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* 2 vols. (Boston, 1895), I, 447.

¹³⁰ Fay, 33; Letter from Peter O. Hatch, Boston, September 1, 1834 as cited in Fay, 52; *Evening Transcript* (1834), cited in Evans, *The Burning of the Mount Benedict Ursuline Community House*, 14..

minds of the scholars,” wrote another Protestant parent. And yet another attested that the nuns never attempted to influence “the minds of pupils upon doctrinal points; or in any way [to interfere] with their previous religious sentiments.”¹³¹

The most prominent Catholic response to the burning of the Ursuline Convent came from Mathew Carey, a nationally acclaimed publisher and editor from Ireland. In a published Circular, Carey called on Roman Catholics of the United States to “serious consideration” of the “atrocious outrage at Charlestown.” The event, he claimed, was inspired by “an infuriate spirit of hostility” rooted in “gross and shameful falsehoods and misapprehensions” which prevailed concerning Catholicism and monastic life. To avoid further violence, Carey encouraged “zealous efforts...to be made for counteraction.” He lamented the defensive position too often assumed by the Catholic community, which he compared with the neglect of Catholics in Ireland to speak out against discrimination by the British. Carey proposed the formation of a Society with members in “the four large cities” in the U.S. Such a society would not only “repel attacks” but also collect dues to publish books and pamphlets to correct misconceptions which they would distribute “gratuitously to persons of different denominations.”¹³² Although Carey’s call to duty went mostly unheeded, he had not underestimated the intensity of convent prejudice, which would only increase in the following decades.

A barrage of convent narratives, which told of vulnerable women held against their will and tortured in convents, began appearing in the early 1830s. They contributed

¹³¹ Letters from Thomas Whitmarsh, September 3, 1834, Hall J. How, September 3, 1834, and N. Houghton, September 4, 1834, as cited in Fay, 60, 57.

¹³² Mathew Carey, “Circular,” Philadelphia, 1834; for more on Carey, see William Clarkin, *Mathew Carey: A Biography of His Publications, 1785-1824* (New York, 1984); and James N. Green, *Mathew Carey: Publisher and Patriot* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1985).

significantly to the burning of Mount Benedict and in perpetuating what Mathew Carey described as “shameful falsehoods and misapprehensions.” *Lorette. The History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun: Exhibiting the Interior of Female Convents*—the prototype of the genre—appeared in 1832. Written by Rev. George Bourne, a Protestant minister and active abolitionist, the story was allegedly based on the deathbed confession of Bourne’s guide through Lower Canada, Diagnu. Near an Indian settlement in Lorette, according to the account, Diagnu found a woman dying on the rocks that rose above the St. Lawrence River. He came to her aid and discovered that she escaped the house of a priest where she had lived as his sexual slave. It wasn’t long before Diagnu and Louise fell in love and became engaged. At their wedding ceremony, however, the two were shocked to discover that they were half-siblings, the offspring of a captive nun who had been imprisoned in a convent and raped by two different priests. As if this were not enough, the priest at the wedding spirited Louise away to a Montreal convent where he locked her up. While a captive of the convent, Louise sought solace in a Bible she kept hidden in her cell until her eventual escape.¹³³

Lorette shared much with the American Indian captivity narrative, the first American literary genre. In *Lorette* and other convent narratives, the cloister replaced the wilderness as a maze-like, dangerous realm cut off from civilization. Lascivious, money-hungry, and murderous priests played the role of “savages.” And vulnerable, imprisoned nuns paralleled white Christian female victims of Indian captivity. *Lorette* cast both convents and Catholic Canada as a type of savage wilderness. Bourne described the

¹³³ George Bourne, *Lorette: The History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun* (New York: William A. Mercin, 1833); for a helpful summary of *Lorette* and a comparison of convent narratives with captivity narratives, see Rebecca Sullivan, “A Wayward from the Wilderness: Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* and the Feminization of Lower Canada in the Nineteenth Century,” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Issue 62 (Fall 1997), 212 – 213.

“profound debasement of the inhabitants of that Province” and depicted the Christmas festivities celebrated there as a kind of pagan ritual in which “every species of sexual indulgence is admitted” including “gormandizing [or gluttonous eating], drinking, and frolicking.” Such debased activities represented a threat to civilization broadly and to the family specifically. It robbed Diagnu and Louise of a happy childhood and later of a legitimate marriage. The heroines of both captivity and convent narratives, moreover, took refuge in the Bible, which they juxtaposed with the identity of their captors. Louise cited specific passages, relating to Old Testament characters, like Esther, who with resolution stated, “if I perish, I perish.” Like Mary Rowlandson, the famous New England Puritan captive during Metacom’s War, who published her captivity narrative to display the glory and sovereignty of God, Bourne justified his account on the basis of “enhancing the love of freedom, purity, and truth.”¹³⁴

Like the wilderness along the outskirts of the English settlement in the colonial era, Canada represented a dangerous, corrupted, and untamed land that threatened Christian (read Protestant) and Anglo-American identity. *Lorette* solidified the association of Canada, Catholicism, and the convent with the wilderness and thus the captivity narrative. This correlation was only strengthened later in Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Convent*, also set in Lower Canada, and partially ghost-written by Bourne. The convent narrative, which would flourish as a genre in the following years, contained all the elements present in the suspicions of the Ursuline

¹³⁴ Bourne, *Lorette*, Preface, 12, 200, x.

Community, with their presentation of threatened female purity, captive women, and foreign dangers.¹³⁵

Lorette, which came out just two years before the burning of the Ursuline Convent, likely contributed to the growing hostility toward Mount Benedict and the silent sanction of the town's residents who watched the edifice burn. New Englanders, well-familiarized with the captivity genre, were surely receptive to stories of female captivity and the alleged threat that such captivity posed to Christianity, white civilization, and female purity. As Bourne not only presented his story as true, but also accused all convents of being "prisons" for women, it was not a far leap for readers to grow suspicious of other Catholic convents in their midst. While it is unlikely that members of the mob, mostly members of the lower-working-class, had the leisure to peruse Bourne's novel, the book received wide reception throughout New England towns and beyond. *Lorette* made best-seller lists alongside such popular works as those written by Susan Warner and Catherine Sedgwick.¹³⁶ The fact that a plethora of other similar convent narratives appeared in the ensuing decades further speaks to the book's staying power and overall influence in the campaign against convents.

Rebecca Reed, a former Mount Benedict resident, more directly contributed to the convent attack. Just before Harrison's retreat from Mount Benedict, Reed allegedly escaped from the convent and later published an exposé about her experience. Within weeks of the appearance of Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* in 1835, book sales topped 10,000. After a month, Reed's exposé sold over 200,000 copies, making it one of the best-sellers of the decade. Although *Six Months* appeared shortly after the burning of the

¹³⁵ Sullivan, "A Wayward from the Wilderness," 212.

¹³⁶ Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 318.

Ursuline Convent, rumors about Reed's story and drafts of her manuscript circulated prior to its publication, especially in Charlestown and surrounding New England towns. Reed's allegations, together with rumors about the escape of Elizabeth Harrison, creating a pervasive sense of suspicion within the town. Moffatt later accused Rebecca Reed's book of being "calculated and designed to destroy the character of the Ursuline Community." She dismissed the work as a "tissue of lies" which only became popular by manipulating the fears of the "ignorant and unreflecting portion of the people." More than any other factor, she claimed, the "circulation of her stories in manuscript and in conversation" worked to "destroy the convent."¹³⁷

Rebecca Theresa Reed came from a poor family in Charlestown. Her father was a local farmer who barely retained the family's residence on rented property. Although the Reed's appeared to have had enough money to send Rebecca to a private school for a time, when her mother died of cancer in 1829 Rebecca quit her schooling to take care of household duties for her father and siblings. In these circumstances few attractive vocational options presented themselves to her. She could work in a factory or as a domestic, but both jobs spelled drudgery and offered no social respect, and without an education, she could not be a teacher.¹³⁸ As a member of the town's Ursuline community, however, Reed would be granted an elite education, have nice things, and, as she might have imagined, avoid a life of toil.

Reed had reportedly been attracted to the Ursuline nuns since their arrival in Charlestown in 1826. Although she was raised Protestant, Reed converted to Catholicism

¹³⁷ Sales figures for *Six Months in a Convent* found in Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 90; Moffatt, *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent*, iii, vii.

¹³⁸ For social background on Reed and vocational prospects available to her and women of her social conditions, see Cohen, "Miss Reed and the Superiors," 156.

at the age of nineteen in June 1831. She made a number of friends within the Charlestown Catholic community, including the town's parish priest, Father Patrick Byrne and even Bishop Fenwick. When Reed first requested to join the Ursuline Community, the mother superior refused, seeing Reed as a "romantic and ignorant girl." Byrne and Fenwick, however, assured Moffatt of Reed's good character and urged her to accept her as a "charity pupil." Reed also reportedly promised the superior that she "could and would be able to wash, iron, [and] scrub the floors." Assenting, Moffatt likely hoped that Reed could assist Harrison, overburdened with work, as she assigned her to work at music. In her initial days as a novice, Reed reportedly appeared "perfectly happy." She soon grew disillusioned, however, with the ascetic practices and penances required of her by the Ursuline Community, which included waking at dawn for prayers and doing manual labor all while teaching music. In her own account, she complained to Moffatt who responded with increasing impatience with the young girl. The superior later recounted that Reed "came to our community doubtless in the belief that she would have nothing to do there but to read, meditate and join in our prayers. She found that every hour had its employment, and that constant labor was one of the chief traits of our order."¹³⁹ In January of 1832, Reed snuck out the back door of the convent and returned to her old neighborhood.

After Reed's "escape," she did not give up on the idea of becoming a nun. She met several times with Father Byrne to discuss the possibility of joining the Sisters of Charity in Maryland. Reed also lived for weeks with a Catholic family in town after she

¹³⁹ Information about Reed's life before entering the Ursuline Convent found in Cohen, "The Respectability of Rebecca Reed," 419; and Cohen, "Miss Reed and the Superiors," 156-7; details also taken from Reed, *Six Months*, 52-68; Moffatt, *An Answer to Six Months*, xv-xix, 3, 8, 12, and 57-61; argument presented by Cohen, "Miss Read and the Superiors," 157; Moffatt, *Answer*, 2.

left Mount Benedict. Later Byrne reported that Reed abandoned her ambitions to be a nun and the Catholic faith when she realized the Catholic family would not financially support her. In March of that year, Reed turned to the Episcopal Church, meeting frequently with Reverend William Croswell. She told Croswell about her experience at Mount Benedict, and he took a vested interest in her story and worked to secure its publication. In the following couple of years, Reed spread slanderous stories about Mount Benedict in conversation and writings throughout the town. She delivered her story in manuscript form to a number of Protestant congregations, various Charlestown families, and even dropped off copies at boarding houses. As a result, Reed became a popular figure within the town's Protestant community, especially among the clergy.¹⁴⁰

What became *Six Months in a Convent*, appearing in March 1835, told of torturous penances assigned to feeble women and the designing intrigue of priests and the mother superior to hold women captive, amass a fortune, and extend the pope's empire throughout the city. Reed described a series of severe penances assigned for the slightest disobedience. If they spoke out of turn, they were made to make the sign of the cross with their tongues on the floor. Some were also starved for weeks. She alleged that the superior and the bishop held many nuns in the convent against their will, including one nun named Sister Mary Francis. When Francis spoke out against the priests or the superior, they merely deemed her insane, a reference, no doubt, to the diagnosis of Harrison's insanity. Reed also claimed that Bishop Fenwick demanded a nun on her deathbed to ask God to send down a bushel of gold so that they might build another convent on Bunker Hill, considered sacred ground by most Americans at the time. As

¹⁴⁰ Cohen, "The Respectability of Rebecca Reed," 442-3; Schultz, 120-1; *Supplement to Six Months in a Convent*, 154-5, 160, 219-21.

Reed became more uncomfortable in this strange prison, explained the book, she overheard Moffatt and the bishop devising a plan to send her off to Canada to keep her from exposing their crimes. Before they could cart her away, however, Reed managed to escape.¹⁴¹

A relatively new publishing house in Boston, Russell, Odiorne & Metcalf, agreed to print *Six Months in a Convent*. Sensing the popularity of the book, the publishers ensured supply of the book “to all principal book sellers,” and went to the expense of stereotyping plates of the book for reprinting. *Six Months* surpassed the publishers’ expectations. After becoming an instant best-seller, Russell, Odiorne & Metcalf worked tirelessly to keep up with high demand for the book, keeping “two power presses constantly in motion, and about forty persons involved in folding and binding.”¹⁴² As it turned out, Rebecca Reed’s exposé became the first anti-Catholic best-seller in the United States, paving the way for decades of similar convent narratives.

While most of *Six Months* proved fallacious, some of the details in the account could be confirmed. The nuns of Mount Benedict, for instance, occasionally “bowed and kissed the floor.” In Moffatt’s response to *Six Months* she defended the practice, arguing that it “was not an important or frequent occupation” and that it was “purely a voluntary act.”¹⁴³ Other details appeared far-fetched; such as the Bishop’s wish for a pot of gold and designs to secretly spirit away Reed to Canada. The frequent references to stock anti-Catholic beliefs—that the bishop colluded with the pope or that nuns lived imprisoned in convents—also seemed to be the work of Reed’s collaborators, more familiar with and

¹⁴¹ Reed, *Six Months in a Convent*, 7, 11, 16, 23 – 24.

¹⁴² Reed, *Six Months*, 2; *Literary and Catholic Sentinel*, Sept. 12, 1835; *American Traveler* [sic], April 14, 1835, cited in Cohen, “The Respectability,” 451.

¹⁴³ Moffatt, *Answer*, 16.

invested in anti-Catholic arguments. Despite the dubious nature of Reed's work and motivations for it, her "escape" served as a harbinger for the burning of the Ursuline Convent. The subsequent publication of *Six Months in a Convent* solidified the continued American campaign against convents.

Before the publication of *Six Months* the Investigative Committee appointed to report on the burning of Mount Benedict considered the relevance of Rebecca Reed. They dismissed her allegations of extreme penances and the cruel treatment of a dying nun, contending that an overwhelming number of witnesses contradicted her claims. The Committee's critical approach to Reed, however, only stirred agitation among the convent's enemies, who rallied behind Reed as a victim of Catholic intrigue. An anonymous author sent an article to the Boston *Daily Advocate* in which he cast Reed as a "defenseless female" and an "American daughter" in need of protection from "foreign institutions." Seeing her as the true victim, Reed's supporters encouraged her to publish her account. After Judge Fay, the author of the petition on behalf of the Ursuline Community, published an article in the Boston *Courier* specifically accusing Reed of inciting the burning of Mount Benedict, Reed responded swiftly. She first apologized for her foray into the public realm, (something considered unladylike) writing of her aversion to come before the public if it were not to defend her good name. She condemned Fay's attack as one against a "defenseless female" before promising that her ensuing exposé would "be more full and explicit than was originally intended."¹⁴⁴ Her account, though pale in comparison to convent narratives to follow, not only contributed the burning of

¹⁴⁴ *Report of the Committee*; Boston *Daily Advocate*, August 14, Sept. 30, 1834; Boston *Daily Advocate*, Oct. 10, 1834; Fay's letter and Reed's response printed in Boston *Courier*, January 5, 7, 1835.

Mount Benedict but also to the burgeoning genre of the convent narrative, paving the way for the likes of Maria Monk, the most famed “escaped nun” in American history.

Convent narratives and violence against communities of women religious, such as the Mount Benedict burning, served to both ignite a campaign against convents that would endure through the following decades and invoke a lot of criticism. In 1837 Norwood Damon published a parody of the popular convent novel that served to highlight the absurd accusations launched against convent residents and to shame the citizens of Charlestown, Massachusetts for their involvement in the burning of the Ursuline convent. *The Chronicles of Mount Benedict: A Tale of the Ursuline Convent*, told the fictional story of Mary Magdalen, resident of the Ursuline convent and witness of its destruction. Norwood depicted outlandish characters, such as a priest named Father Everlust, who enjoyed nothing more than “gin cocktails, dice and cards, and unchaste nuns.” In an obvious reference to rumors of Elizabeth Harrison’s “escape,” Norwood described the ill-fated escape of Saint Mary Francis Harrison. Her plans floundered when priests discovered her the next day “passed out drunk in a gutter beneath the convent fence.” They sentenced her to death after demanding an answer as to “why [she] presumed to go and tell those mobocratic Yankees of our actions.” In keeping with the gruesome revelries found in other convent narratives, Norwood described Harrison strung up by a “large hook, with a long chain...fastened in her mouth” like a fish. After which, “a horse was hitched to the chain, [and] the friars hurrahed and cracked their whips, the horse started, and away went Mary Saint Frances Harrison.”¹⁴⁵ This produced a “most tremendous excitement among the good people of Charlestown.”

¹⁴⁵ Damon Norwood, *The Chronicles of Mount Benedict: A Tale of the Ursuline Convent* (Boston: Printed for the Publisher, 1837), 153, 147.

Norwood continued to ridicule “ignorant prejudices and narrow-minded belief of thousands of New Englanders.” In response to the uproar caused by the violent murder of Saint Mary Francis Harrison in the novel, the pope himself, “accompanied by his friend the devil, came over the big sea at once” to quell the mounting suspicions of the town’s people against the convent. After the murder of another refractory nun, who was burned to death for her insubordination, the people of the town mobilized against the convent. The “dark and dingy smoke [that] proceeded from the chimneys of the convent” from her “burning flesh” allowed the people of the town to “suspect the truth instantly.” From that point, Norwood depicted the burning of the convent, mixing reality with farce. While the mob advanced into the convent, a terrified pope hid beneath the altar and the priests plotted with Satan. “Would that Beelzebub were our governor,” intoned priest Everlust, “and the prince of darkness the chief ruler of our band. If you will save us and our convent, we will owe you eternal gratitude.” In the end, “King Beelzebub and his imps” escaped the burning embers while the rest of the inmates perished inside.¹⁴⁶

With this outlandish narrative Norwood gave vent to his frustration with anti-convent propaganda, Charlestown residents’ credulity, and the burning of Mount Benedict. He scoffed at the popular belief, portrayed in tales such as *Lorette* and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, that most convents housed a giant pit into which were thrown “refractory nuns and strangled babies.” Though the nuns of Charlestown claimed the hole found in their own kitchen floor was for “slop,” wrote Norwood in his satirical novel, “the wise people of Charlestown” knew better and also were convinced that an alligator lived in the pit who was not discovered after the burning because “he burrowed so deep

¹⁴⁶ Norwood, *The Chronicles of Mount Benedict*, xiii, 149, 178, 180 – 181.

beneath the ground.” While no one in New England advanced the idea that priests employed alligators to expunge their crimes, many people did believe or at least attest to the reality of giant pits in convents in which nuns and babies were disposed. In the preface, Norwood denounced the way in which citizens of “this generation” willingly believed “a bold unvarnished lie...as in the cases of Maria Monk and others.” Though not a Catholic himself, Norwood criticized popular American culture of the 1830s by which many “found their belief not on the known customs and opinions of the Roman Catholics of the present day, but upon the tales they read of popery as it was four hundred years ago.”¹⁴⁷

The Burning of Mount Benedict and the popularity of convent narratives did more to spur a culture of anti-Catholicism than elicit tolerance. Within a week of the burning of the Ursuline convent, one of the most extreme anti-Catholic periodicals appeared. Samuel Smith, a self-styled “late popish priest,” edited *Downfall of Babylon, or the Triumph of Truth over Popery*, published first in Philadelphia and then New York. The mission of the paper, as Smith described, was to “warn our Protestant friends of the insidious Jesuitical workings of that abomination, showing its demoralizing, debasing character.” In a series of articles Smith extended a justification for the burning of the Ursuline convent. The actions of the mob were “but a spark” compared with the history of Catholic crimes. “One laid in ashes an edifice of superstition, while the other involved a nation in anarchy and bloodshed.” The motives of the rioters, he argued further, were “prompted by the love of truth and decency.” *Downfall* praised God for the “good deliverance” of the accused for the burning of the convent and asserted their “perfect innocence.” In another

¹⁴⁷ Norwood, 187, xi, xiii.

issue, the paper advertised Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*, describing her as "a victim of the delusions of popery." The facts of her exposé, concluded the article, would "bring glory to God" if they were "imparted to every individual in the United States."¹⁴⁸

Other anti-Catholic periodicals appeared within the decade, with titles such as *Anti-Romanist*, *Priestcraft Unmasked*, and *Priestcraft Exposed*, setting the tone for the campaign against convents. The first openly anti-Catholic paper appeared in New York in 1830 under the title *The Protestant*. The Reverend George Bourne, author of *Lorette* and co-author of Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu*, served as editor. He dedicated the paper to "inculcating the Gospel doctrines against Romish corruptions," and issued such articles as "Code of the Jesuits," "Monkish Legends," and "Bigotry and Persecution." The Reverend William Brownlee, prominent Reformed minister, author, and president of the New York Protestant Association, established the highly sensational and vitriolic *American Protestant Vindicator*, which ran from 1836 to 1840. Throughout the decade, Brownlee's paper supported anti-convent literature and actions and issued articles on the "unconstitutionality of convents," the "sensuality and selfishness of Roman priests," and the "poor and persecuted females" within the cloister.¹⁴⁹

Nativist presses pointed to the increased number of convents as evidence of the growing "disease" of Romanism in America. Before urging America to "wake up!," *Downfall of Babylon* announced the arrival of three priests and two nuns in St. Louis

¹⁴⁸ Samuel B. Smith, *Downfall of Babylon* 1, no. 8, (January 3, 1835); "Important Disclosures," *Downfall* 1, no. 23, (April 18, 1835), courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society; first editions were published in Philadelphia and New York, while beginning in 1835 issues were published only in New York; for more information on anti-Catholic works from 1830's America, see Ray Allen Billington "Tentative Bibliography of Anti-Catholic Propaganda in the United States, 1800-1860," *The Catholic Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (January 1933): 492-513.

¹⁴⁹ W. C. Brownlee, ed., *American Protestant Vindicator*, 2, no. 40 (July 6, 1836), no. 44 (August 3, 1836).

along with their plans to establish another Ursuline convent in America. The year the mob attacked Mount Benedict, Samuel Smith alerted the public to the arrival of one hundred priests in New York. The following year, he alarmed readers of the arrival of six hundred more. Providing a worldwide update, he also reported declining numbers of seminaries and convents in Portugal in 1834. “Portugal is at length almost emancipated from papal slavery! . . . The Dark Ages have passed!” Seeing Catholicism, and especially convents, as vestiges of a superstitious, burdensome past, nativists assumed that like other past traditions, they would go away. If they did not, if Catholic immigrants continued to migrate to the United States and build their convents, their “temples of the Beast,” the progress of history would be impeded.¹⁵⁰

Another anti-Catholic periodical contributed to a near repeat of the burning of the Ursuline Convent in Baltimore. One year after the burning of Mount Benedict, two Presbyterian ministers, Reverends Robert J. Breckinridge and Andrew B. Cross, established the *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*. From its founding, the paper attacked the convent system in particular. In May 1835, it published a leading article entitled “Carmelite Convent in Baltimore—An Outrage Which Was Probably Committed Therein.” Based on the testimony of six members of the Methodist Church, located near the Carmelite Convent, the article told of desperate cries for help that came pouring from within the walls of the convent one evening. Breckenridge charged Father Gildea, the convent supervisor, with holding young women against their will and torturing them if they tried to escape. “Whereas we once thought they were willing victims,” wrote Breckinridge of the nuns, “we are now convinced they are not.” Breckenridge even

¹⁵⁰ “The 100 Popish Ecclesiastics who Arrived in N. York in the Year 1834,” *Downfall of Babylon* 1, no. 24 (April 25, 1835); “Decline of Popery in England,” *Downfall of Babylon* 1, no. 1 (August 14, 1834).

alluded to the burning of Mount Benedict writing that an escaped nun “led to the burning of the ‘cage of unclean birds’ last summer.” It was now left to the Archbishop of the diocese, declared Breckenridge, to explain the strange cries that emanated from the convent.¹⁵¹

These suspicions, reinforced by the “escape” of Sister Isabella Neale from Baltimore’s Carmelite Convent, led to a riot. Neale left the convent on August 18, 1839 on a Sunday morning. She frantically ran from house to house until she gained entrance in the home of the town jailer, Mr. Wilcox. Like Elizabeth Harrison, Neale’s story spread quickly and within a day a crowd of angry spectators gathered on the street outside of the Carmelite Convent. In the meantime, Mayor Sheppard C. Leakin helped to alleviate some of the crowd’s agitation by securing Neale’s transportation to a nearby hospital. Although Neale was later found to be mentally unstable, or in the words of the university physicians, a “monomaniac,” her departure from the convent set off three nights of rioting in Baltimore.¹⁵²

The Carmelites established the first convent in the territorial United States in Port Tobacco, Maryland in 1790 before moving to Baltimore in 1831. Unlike later, active communities of women religious, the Carmelites practiced a strict cloistered rule, devoting themselves completely to prayer and contemplation. After moving to Baltimore, however, the order expanded its reach, opening a school on Aisquith Street. Their

¹⁵¹ “Carmelite Convent in Baltimore: An Outrage which was Probably Committed Therein,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 1, no. 5 (May 1835).

¹⁵² For a thorough description of the riot, see Joseph G. Mannard, “The 1839 Baltimore Nunnery Riot: An Episode in Jacksonian Nativism and Social Violence,” in Timothy J. Meagher, ed. *Urban American Catholicism: The Culture and Identity of the American Catholic People* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 192-206; details on Neal’s diagnosis in *National Intelligencer*, (August 22, 1839); for news coverage, see “Escape of a Nun from the Carmelite Prison in Aisquith Street,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 5, no. 9 (September 1839).

presence, along with the Sisters of Charity in the city, came more and more under suspicion in the light of the increasing production of convent propaganda, growing anti-Catholicism, and nativist unrest.¹⁵³

On the first night of the riots, the crowd threatened to tear down the convent and free the “imprisoned women.” Hoping to avert a repeat of Mount Benedict, Mayor Leakin immediately called on six hundred City Guards to protect the convent. In the meantime, the Mayor and three other prominent town leaders inspected the building and questioned the nuns about their treatment. Despite a lack of incriminating evidence, the crowd refused to disperse. After a newspaper printed a dubious report that “Miss Isabella Neal was sane,” the following day the crowd started launching rocks at the barricade of City Guards blocking the convent. The Guards’ fixed bayonets scared the rioters away, but they returned for a third night on August 20, though considerably fewer in number. The next day, two physicians confirmed that Neal “was certainly deranged.” The rioting ceased that evening, as force and “scientific conclusions” seemed to have quieted the rage. As with the mob that burned the Ursuline Convent, the Baltimore rioters acted from mixed motivations rooted in latent nativism or anti-Catholicism and sympathy for alleged endangered women.¹⁵⁴

Despite the quelling of the violence, the *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* jumped on the story. They reported that Neal, “a prisoner” of the Carmelite convent for nineteen years, finally “succeeded in getting out.” According to the article, the Mayor sent Neal to the hospital, not to appease the crowd or to investigate her mental

¹⁵³ Thomas W. Spalding, *The Premier See: A History of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, 1789-1989* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 55-6, 108, 112-5.

¹⁵⁴ Mannard, 193-4.

health, but to “protect” her from those who wished to secure her return to the convent. The crowds that gathered outside the Carmelite Convent, stated the article, consisted of “indignant” Protestants and shame-filled “papists.” Even if Neal was “deranged,” as the “papists” attested, this “did not justify...keeping a prisoner.” Based on a personal interview, explained the author, “she seemed sane enough.” The editors concluded that Neal’s escape helped the good citizens finally understand the danger convents posed to women and that “we have told them only the truth.”¹⁵⁵

The burning of Mount Benedict, the Baltimore Nunnery Riot, and the growing popularity of convent narratives all took place within a context of heightened vigilante violence. In large part, the nation tolerated mobs who enacted extra-legal violence when they believed laws and regulations insufficient. From the election riots of 1834 to hunger riots during the economic depression of 1837, citizens responded to social, political, economic, and religious unrest by taking matters into their own hands. The *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, though not explicitly condoning the use of violence, contended that if civil authorities would not protect women from priests’ “prisons,” then “society *en masse* is divinely commissioned to rise and correct them.” Convent rioters and instigators of violence fit in naturally in an era known for its vigilantism.¹⁵⁶

Although many of the Ursulines were American-born, the belief that convents represented a foreign intrusion also ignited hostility toward nuns in the 1830s. The final statement of the defense attorney rested on the unreliability of a “foreign and imported testimony,” referring to the Ursuline Community and their supporters. The attorney in

¹⁵⁵ “Escape of a Nun from a Carmelite Prison in Aisquith Street,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 5, no. 9 (September 1839).

¹⁵⁶ “Escape of a Nun,” *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* (September 1839); See also Mannard, 23.

this way adeptly appealed to long-standing Anglo-Irish hostility that was only heightened throughout the 1820s and 1830s in New England by the arrival of large numbers of Irish immigrants. The Boston *Daily Advocate* article also highlighted the importance of ethnic tensions, as it called on citizens to protect Rebecca Reed, “an *American* daughter,” from “foreign institutions.”¹⁵⁷ Convent narratives, likewise, presented the cloister—often associated with Canada or Europe—as a foreign and savage threat to the nation’s women, furthering this distinction.

What made this “foreign influence” so menacing was the alleged threat it posed to women. Members of the Mount Benedict mob and those who rioted outside the Baltimore convent claimed to have acted in the defense of vulnerable women who needed protection. It was to save Elizabeth Harrison from imprisonment, torture, and even murder that stirred the Charlestown mob into action. Gathered citizens in Baltimore likewise responded to the supposed cries of captive females within the walls of the Carmelite Convent. The idea that women were captives and the call to protect them served as central themes of convent propaganda. The prospect of saving “unsuspecting females” from “priests’ brothels” and slave-driving mother superiors invigorated and ennobled the American campaign against convents.¹⁵⁸

If not a threat to the lives of women, convents posed a danger to female purity and dominant gender roles. Although convent life allegedly fostered piety, purity, and submissiveness among women—attributes highly valued among nineteenth century women—the separation of these virtues from family life rendered convents subversive in

¹⁵⁷ For criticism of the Charlestown convent as a foreign institution, see *Supplement*, 66-70; Boston *Daily Advocate* (Oct. 10, 1835).

¹⁵⁸ *Downfall of Babylon* 1, no. 2 (Oct. 30, 1834); *Downfall of Babylon*, 1, no. 1 (Aug. 18, 1834).

the minds of many nineteenth-century Americans. Before and after the burning of the Ursuline Convent, anti-Catholic writers condemned convents as “destructive of all domestic and social relations.” Smith condemned the cloister for “destroying domestic felicity.” The *Protestant Vindicator* advocated banning convents on the basis that they “prevent women from fulfilling those duties of wife and mother which God has appointed.” While the ideal of domesticity was not as prevalent in reality—a significant number of women never married and/or worked in factories—the concept solidified gendered expectations.¹⁵⁹ The figure of the nun seemed to threaten the female domestic ideal. At the same time, out from under the control of husband and father, and supposedly under the control of priest and pope, convents posed a danger to male patriarchy. The nun’s representation as the subversion of the era’s gender system only helped to ignite popular agitation toward convents.

General hostility toward Catholicism, at times associated with gender, class, and ethnicity, cannot be overestimated in contributing to the American campaign against convents. Benjamin F. Hallett, who wrote the Introduction to *Six Months in a Convent*, hailed Rebecca Reed as a second Martin Luther. He explained the purpose of her narrative as meant to reveal “the absurd superstitions...the ridiculous penances, the secret confessionals, [and] the unchecked facilities for intrigue...” The influential Lyman Beecher, whose public sermons in July 1834 helped stir agitation toward the Ursuline Community, based his message in religious opposition to Catholicism and monastic life.

¹⁵⁹ Cohen, “Miss Reed and the Superiors,” 151; Reed, *Six Months*, 6; *Downfall* 1, no. 5 (December 13, 1834); *Protestant Vindicator* 2, no. 41 (July 13, 1836); two works that describe the experience of antebellum women in Boston, see Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 43-63; and Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

At the trial for the burning of the convent, the superior and bishop found themselves defending their faith and convent life more than the accused defended their actions. Afterwards, an exasperated Fenwick wrote, “No law or justice is to be expected in this land where Catholics are constantly calumniated and the strongest prejudices exist against them.” When the prosecuting attorney pleaded with the jury to “separate from your minds preconceived opinions...to give an impartial verdict,” he likely referred to anti-Catholic beliefs that prevented the jury from considering larger questions of justice.¹⁶⁰ The sheer growth of anti-Catholic periodicals and societies suggests the importance of religious bias in the burning of Mount Benedict and the subsequent campaign against convents.

Curiosity constitutes a final, less measurable, factor in convent propaganda and violence that grew up in the 1830s. Covering the “probable atrocity” at the Carmelite Convent, *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* referred to “the carefully closed and curiously grated windows.” What occurred out of sight proved alluring enough to its readership to spark a riot. *Awful Disclosures* ignited “no small excitement of curiosity,” reported *Downfall of Babylon*. To be sure, Maria Monk, the “escaped nun,” received international notoriety, her book becoming an instant sensation and selling over 300,000 copies by 1860. Being foreign, new, and relatively few in number, convents became a curiosity for outsiders. They easily believed rumors about imprisoned and tortured women because they had to rely on their imaginations to understand convent life. Onlookers could only imagine what occurred behind fortifications and within inner chambers where visitors were not permitted. When an “escaped nun” or renegade priest

¹⁶⁰ Reed, *Six Months*, 3-6, 14; see Beecher, *Plea for the West*; and Fenwick, “Memoranda,” I, p. 286.

emerged with a tantalizing story, their authority as “insiders” proved viable to an intrigued populace ignorant of convent life. Anti-Catholic arguments rendered people susceptible to such beliefs, but the novelty and secrecy of convent life solidified them.¹⁶¹

In 1846 the Massachusetts legislature voted again on whether or not to raise funds of compensation for the ruined property at Mount Benedict. The vote failed to pass, and faced defeat again in 1853 and 1854. The hill of Mount Benedict stood as a blackened ruin for years afterward.¹⁶² Scattered bricks and other remnants on the patchy grass likely held different meaning for different people, from symbolizing a defeat of Rome, to religious sectarianism gone too far, to the epitome of intolerance and persecution. The burning of the Charlestown Convent inaugurated the American campaign against convents and represented a key event in American nativism which would culminate with the popular Know-Nothing political party and its formation of “Nunnery Committees” in the 1850s. Convent exposés by Rebecca Reed and George Bourne likewise signaled the first best-selling anti-Catholic sensational works and served to usher in the convent narrative genre. Although no single act of violence would equal that perpetuated at Mount Benedict in August of 1834, prejudice against nuns and convent life would only continue to grow throughout the following decades, inspired by the enormously popular convent narrative by Maria Monk, the increasing numbers of Catholics and convents within the U.S., and a series of other escaped nun tales and convent propaganda.

¹⁶¹ “Carmelite Convent in Baltimore,” *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 1, no. 5 (May 1835); *Downfall of Babylon* 2, no. 2 (February 6, 1836); for more details describing the intriguing and infuriating nature of “secrets” for antebellum Americas, see Mannard, “Nunnery Riot,” 198.

¹⁶² Hamilton, 49; Evans, 18.

CHAPTER THREE

TEXTBOOK POPERY: CONVENT SCHOOLS, BIBLE WARS, AND THE NATION'S CHILDREN

It is not a question of creeds and sects, but it is a grave question of how the future ornaments to our most refined society, the future accomplished mothers of American citizens, shall be educated.—Six Months in a Convent (1835)

The nuns are very skillful in making converts, and the ceremonies well-calculated to captivate the minds of young people.—Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery (1846)

In 1837 *The Presbyterian*, a Kentucky newspaper, published an article warning its readers about a Catholic conspiracy in the United States and the important role convents and convent schools played in advancing the purposes of Rome.

It is well known that the Pope and his clergy regard their mission in America as far more important than any others, and that the principal means by which they expect to extend their influence in our country, is the education of youth. And it should be understood by Protestants that their efforts are especially directed to *female education*. In the state of Kentucky they have ten female establishments of which five are conducted by the Sisters of Charity and five by the Sisters of Loretto...

Another article in the *Boston Recorder* printed in 1845, warned of the “loathsome and corrupting influence of nunneries, confessionals, priests, mother abbesses, and the Sisters of Charity” that “young ladies” faced in convent schools. These warnings reflected the tone of the prevailing criticism of convents in America throughout the 1840s. While the advent of convent narratives in the previous decade focused on runaway nuns, sex, and sadism, those in the 1840s concentrated more on convent schools, the religious

upbringing of children, and the role convent schools played in a wider papal conspiracy in the United States.¹⁶³

One of the most popular convent narratives of the decade, *The Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* (1845), captured the focus on convent schools and Biblical and religious opposition to Catholicism and convents. Author Rachel McCrindell presented the book as “not a work of fiction, but a collection of facts thrown together.” In it, wealthy Protestant English parents send their young daughter to a French convent school. Although the nuns promised not to proselytize their Protestant pupils, the young girl confronts Catholic challenges to her Protestant beliefs daily. Fortunately she knows enough of the Bible to call to mind Scripture verses that revealed the truth. When she witnesses Catholic pupils kneeling before statues, she recites a passage from the book of Exodus warning against idolatry. When the mother superior tries to convince her of the merits of confession, she refers to the passage about Christ being the one mediator between God and man. When a Catholic student exclaims “Mon Dieu!” the young Protestant girl cites the Biblical invective against taking the Lord’s name in vain. And when her Catholic instructors praise the young girl for her diligence in the classroom and her high moral conduct, she shrinks back from the applause so as not to claim any “good works” for herself, giving all the credit to “God alone.”¹⁶⁴

Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery received high praise in the press. The *Episcopal Recorder* lauded the book for extending “excellent lessons on duty” and advised its placement “in every Sunday-school library.” The *Presbyterian* upheld the

¹⁶³ *The Presbyterian* quoted by *The Catholic Advocate* (Louisville) (August 26, 1837); “Nunneries and the Confessional,” *Boston Recorder* 30, no. 41 (October 9, 1845).

¹⁶⁴ Rachel McCrindell, *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Hooker, 1846), preface, 104, 166.

book as a true picture of the “arts employed in a French convent to proselyte Protestant pupils” and warned that such methods were “invariably employed in Roman Catholic schools” in general. By 1846 McCrindell’s book went through ten editions. That year its New York publishers reprinted the work under a new subtitle: *A Warning to Protestants Against Education in Catholic Seminaries*.¹⁶⁵ The great popularity of this narrative reflected the growing suspicion beyond convents in general to convent schools and Catholic education in America.

Other convent narratives expressed similar concerns about Catholic education. *The Nun of St. Ursula* (1845) and “The Grey Nuns of Montreal” (1844) both described the dangers of convent schools for young girls, criticizing Protestant parents for sending their daughters into the “snares of popery.” An unsuspecting mother in *The Nun of St. Ursula* wept when her only daughter chose a “living death” as a nun over “filial duty” after spending time in a convent school. “The Grey Nuns of Montreal” described convents as places where young women were “buried alive” and proclaimed shockingly that “our own Protestant families furnish the victims.” *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* likewise lamented that too often “parents lull their minds into a false security” about sending their daughters to convent schools by the promise such schools make not to interfere with matters of religion. As a result, “we often see the unhappy father deserted in his old age by daughters” who chose “a living death in the cloister.” Opponents of convent schools promoted these books and others, “which can be bought for a trifle,” as a

¹⁶⁵ Rachel McCrindell, *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery, or The Snares of Popery: A Warning to Protestants Against Education in Catholic Seminaries* 10th ed. (New York: Wellman, 1846).

promising “way to awaken Protestant parents inclined to favor convents and Catholic schools for young ladies.”¹⁶⁶

Protestant parents who sent their daughters to convent schools placed “worldly accomplishments” above their children’s “eternal influences,” authors claimed. “You must know that it is common for fashionable Protestants to send their daughters to the convent school to get an education, as though their own schools were of an inferior character,” expressed the narrator in *The Nun of St. Ursula*. William Hogan, a former Catholic priest, criticized Protestant mothers for being led by “malign influences of fashion” in sending their daughters, “their earthly idols,” to a convent academy.

McCrindell wrote that Protestant parents merely sent their children to convent schools to add a “fashionable polish” to their educations. Such criticisms reflected a growing democratic ethos in America that was critical of the upper classes and the idea of a group of people being somehow set apart. They also suggested the fear that certain groups of Protestants were not taking their religious principles as seriously as they ought.¹⁶⁷

McCrindell’s book and others also fit in well with the efforts of Protestant reform associations to promote the Bible alone as the sole guide of Christian instruction and warn against the inroads of “popery.” By the 1840s dozens of organizations dedicated themselves to reviving principles of the Protestant Reformation, including the American Society for Promoting the Principles of the Protestant Reformation, the Protestant Reformation Society, and the American Tract Society. Believing that Protestant

¹⁶⁶ McCrindell, preface; Harry Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula, or, the Burning of the Convent: A Romance of Mount Benedict* (Boston: Gleason, 1845), 10; “The Grey Nuns of Montreal,” *Christian Parlor Magazine* (September 1844); “Nunneries and the Confessional,” *Boston Recorder*.

¹⁶⁷ McCrindell, 83; Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula*, 12; William Hogan, *Popery! As It Was and as It Is; Also, Auricular Confession; and Popish Nunneries* (1845; repr., Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1854) 238; McCrindell, 99.

Americans had strayed from their founding ideals and that the religious background of many immigrants further threatened the Protestant character of the nation, these groups sought a revival of the Protestant Reformation in the nineteenth century. In 1846 the *Christian Examiner* noted that “the anti-Romanist organizations and movements of the day are making larger contributions to our vernacular literature than we have room to chronicle.” As an outgrowth of the efforts to revive the Protestant Reformation, most of this decade’s literature focused more on Biblical reasons why the celibate life was un-Christian, alleged un-Christian beliefs endorsed by Catholics, and the role convents played in advancing the work of the “Man of Sin,” the pope. According to the American Tract Society, the momentous energy poured into such organizations would bring about “a new Reformation in America.”¹⁶⁸

Members of the American Tract Society scouted out Protestant parents who sent their children to convent schools. One woman addressed an open letter to another who sent her daughter to the school of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Cincinnati, Ohio. *A Letter of an American Mother to an American Mother* appeared alongside Tract number 360, entitled “Roman Catholic Female Schools.” The tract warned of the danger presented to “this Protestant Nation” and “our Republican Government” by “foreign emigrants” who through funding from the “papal kings of Europe,” offer inexpensive education to American children. “The education of thousands of our youth,” explained the tract, “are committed Romanists, whose first aim is to convert them to their faith.” The tract stressed

¹⁶⁸ For information on work and influence of the American Tract Society, see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); “Protestantism,” *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany* 41, no. 1 (July 1846); *American Protestant Vindicator* (December 1, 1841); American Tract Society *Twenty-ninth Annual Report* (Boston, 1843), cited in Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800 – 1860* (1938 repr.: Chicago: Quadrangle Paperbacks, 1964), 182.

the unique threat to young Protestant girls, claiming that “1,500 young ladies are under their influence” in Illinois alone. Nuns urge Protestants of “only ten years in age” to attend confession and “pray to the Virgin,” according to the tract. The American Tract Society and other groups urged Protestant parents to take responsibility against this foreign and dangerous education by keeping their children away from nuns.¹⁶⁹

In focusing on children’s education and the Bible, such anti-convent sentiment was significantly tamer in nature than that in the 1830s. Stories of sex and sadism were markedly absent from most of the era’s convent narratives which described an autocratic but not murderous influence of the mother superior. Convents or convent schools threatened one’s eternal state more than a woman’s virtue. In these tales, priests offered Protestant children candy to win them over to Catholicism, but did not otherwise abuse them. Some publishers even printed convent narratives for children, with a decidedly toned down rhetoric, including *Luzette: or, Good Brought out of Evil*, a convent story published by the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society in 1847. In the story Luzette’s mother “locked her up in a hateful nunnery.” With the help of charitable Protestant women, however, Luzette escaped and returned home where she converted her family to the Protestant faith.¹⁷⁰

Such literature likely appealed to a more respectable, middle-class audience than some of the works published in the previous decade. The earlier stories of Maria Monk and Rosamond Culbertson, though widely popular, garnered harsh criticism from a more judicious audience. Among extending a voyeuristic scene of a priest raping a fourteen

¹⁶⁹ Letter reprinted in *The Catholic Telegraph* 11, no. 35, Cincinnati (August 27, 1842), 278.

¹⁷⁰ Maria D. Weston, *Luzette: Good Brought Out of Evil* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1847).

year old girl, *Rosamond* (1836) also claimed that the Spanish priests enjoyed cutting up “young negroes for the purpose of making them into sausages.” One newspaper editor categorized such anti-Catholic attacks with “the humbugs of our time.” Such “tales of lust and blood and murder...with which the ultra-Protestant press is teeming,” he wrote, are “disgracing [to] the holy office of the ministry, and are adapted...to strengthen the hands of infidelity and irreligion.” Ray Allen Billington in his scholarship on nativism, argued that the anti-Catholic literature in the 1840s constituted “an earnest effort [on behalf of nativists] to win to their standard the religiously inclined sober citizen of the United States” to extend their influence.¹⁷¹ Focusing on issues of children’s education, the Bible in schools, and Reformation ideals was a sure way to do that.

One of the strongest arguments against convent schools was that they served to convert young Protestant girls to Catholicism, or even worse, convince them to become nuns. In 1844 the *Louisville Morning Courier* warned its readers that “Roman Catholics propose to secure their ascendancy in this country chiefly by the means of literary institutions...to bring Protestant youth of this country under their influence.” *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* also warned that “The nuns were very skillful in making converts, and the ceremonies were well-calculated to captivate the minds of young people.” William Hogan, one of the most famous “ex-priests” of the era, speaking from a position of alleged authority as a “former chaplain of one of those nunneries,” claimed that the constant themes of conversation in a convent school included “the great beatitudes of a single life” and “the glories of a nun’s life.” Hogan informed his readers

¹⁷¹ David M. Reese, *Humbugs of New York; being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion, whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion* (New York: J. S. Taylor, 1838), 210, 217; Rosamond Culbertson, *Rosamond; or, A Narrative of the Captivity and Suffering of an American Female under the Popish Priests, in the Island of Cuba* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1836), 11; Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 142.

that “the abominations of a convent [were] too horrible even to mention.” While he assured his readers that Maryland and New York legislatures were making efforts to “suppress such vice,” in the meantime, it behooved Protestant parents not to send their daughters to convent schools.¹⁷²

His “opposition to nunneries,” William Hogan explained, led him out the priesthood and the Catholic Church. He knew them personally “to be places of sin, shame, and sorrow.” Borrowing the title from a popular abolitionist book, *American Slavery As It Is*, by Theodore Dwight Weld, Hogan published *Popery! As It Was and as It Is; also, Auricular Confession; and Popish Nunneries*. The book was reprinted at least ten times before 1860. In it Hogan described convents as “little fortifications” that “licentious, lecherous, profligate priests and monks” formed around nuns for their supposed protection. “I have been chaplain in one of the those nunneries,” he explained, “and I assure my readers on my honor as a man that the very air we breathe is not made more obedient or subservient to our use than a nun...to the use of popish priests.” Such places, he asserted, ought not to be tolerated by the “sons of free men” in America. Hogan also warned parents against sending their children to the “fashionable schools” attached to “nunneries.” For such schools provided the pathway to become a nun and thus to be “debauched.”¹⁷³

Hogan combined arguments against convents with criticism of the confessional, arguing that confession “commences the ruin of the soul.” Anti-convent literature warned

¹⁷² *Louisville Morning Courier* (December 8, 1844); McCrindell, *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery*, 219; William Hogan, *A Synopsis of Popery, as It Was and as It Is* (Boston: Redding & Co., 1845), 130 – 133.

¹⁷³ “William Hogan,” *Boston Recorder*; Hogan, *Synopsis of Popery, As It Was and as It Is*, 132; Hogan, *Popery! As It Was and as It Is; Also, Auricular Confession; and Popish Nunneries*, 264, 246.

that even Protestant pupils in convent schools were made to go to confession. Addressing “American Mothers,” Hogan asked if it seemed at all appropriate for “a young lady, between the ages of twelve to twenty, to be on her knees, her lips nearly close pressed to the cheek of a priest, who in all probability is not over twenty-five or thirty years old.” Hogan composed a hypothetical conversation between a confessor and penitent, in which the priest rather than simply listening to the confession of the girl, plants ideas in her mind of new sins of which she had never conceived. “Do you have any immodest thoughts?” “Do you not like thinking about any men?” “Would you ever like to sleep with them?” Continuing in this way, “day after day, week after week,” explained Hogan, the “reptile confessor... works up her passions” until she becomes “his easy prey.” From that point on, it was a simple decision for the young woman to become a nun, for either she fell in love with the priest or feared public disgrace in the outside world.¹⁷⁴

William Hogan was one among a coterie of “late popish priests” in the early nineteenth century. In 1819 he arrived to America from Limerick, Ireland to serve the parish of St. Mary’s in the diocese of Philadelphia. Young, sociable, handsome, and known for his ability to preach, Hogan became a beloved pastor almost immediately. He was also an active minister, involved in charitable work, reviving religious instruction, and instituting Sunday Schools. Yet in October of 1821 a scandal broke out when Mary Connell, Hogan’s personal assistant, charged him with attempted rape and battery. After

¹⁷⁴ Hogan, *Poperly!*, 253 – 254; for more on the anti-Catholic arguments against the alleged threat of confessions to female purity, see Marie Anne Pagliarini, “The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America,” *Religion and Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (Winter, 1999), pp.105-110.

a lengthy and public trial Hogan was acquitted of the charge in April the following year, but not everyone was convinced of his innocence.¹⁷⁵

With raised suspicions of the young priest, Philadelphia's bishop, Henry Conwell, ordered Hogan to move from his private home into the priests' residence at Saint Joseph's. On December 10, Hogan publically defied this instruction during a sermon in which he declared no man could tell him where to live or force him to submit to the will of Bishop Conwell. The bishop suspended Hogan two days later. In the midst of this confrontation, Hogan became involved in a bitter trustee controversy over whether church members—trustees—should have responsibility for the parish, such as church finances and property management. Hogan supported the establishment of trusteeism and with a group of loyal supporters behind him, boldly established his own congregation where he performed mass and used the pulpit to denounce other members of the Catholic clergy. It was not long before Conwell received approval to remove Hogan from the priesthood. Hogan then publically lambasted the Catholic Church and announced his new adherence to Greek Orthodoxy. The events caused considerable unrest within the diocese, creating a bitter division among its parishioners, in what became known as the “Hogan schism.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Philip G. Bochanski, C.O., ed., *Our Faith-Filled Heritage: The Church of Philadelphia, Bicentennial as a Diocese, 1808 – 2008* (Philadelphia: The Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 2008), 44 – 45

¹⁷⁶ Listener, *A Compendious Trial of the Rev. William Hogan, Pastor of the Roman Catholic Church of St. Mary's: On an Indictment for an Assault and Battery on the Person of Mary Connell* (Philadelphia: no. 92, South Fifth Street, 1822); Bochanski, ed., *Our Faith-Filled Heritage*, 44 – 45; “Rev. William Hogan,” *Baltimore Patriot* 24, no. 22 (July 29, 1824); John England, *Works of Right Reverend John England, First Bishop of Charlestown*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1849), 109 – 110. For more on the issue of “trusteeism” in Philadelphia, see Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). The trustee controversy enveloped other Catholic parishes in early America as more democratic ideas of authority came into conflict with traditional modes. For more on this, see Patrick W. Carey, *People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

After Hogan's brief tenure as a Catholic priest, he became a public opponent of Catholicism. He authored a series of books denouncing "popery," including *The American Text-Book of Popery* (1847), and served as editor of the *Daily American*. Protestant and nativist papers quickly enlisted him in their cause against Rome, for both political and religious reasons. In 1844, the year of the Philadelphia riots between the city's nativists and Irish Catholic immigrants, the *Boston Recorder* published an article on Hogan. The article alleged that Hogan "renounced Romanism because he believes it incompatible with our republican institutions," and because "he is in favor of all American associations." Other articles lauded Hogan's fervent accusations against Catholics and Catholicism on the basis of his insider experience in the Church of Rome. This entitled him to his readers' "implicit confidence" of all his accusations, confirming readers "in what they had vaguely known and partly believed." Hogan's condemnation of convents also reinforced suspicions and fears of convent life. As "every nun has a confessor," wrote Hogan, "every confessor has a concubine, and there are very few of them who have not several."¹⁷⁷

Other Catholic renegades confirmed Hogan's denunciations of Catholicism and convents. Claiming to be a former priest, though later revealed as a fraud, Rev. Dr. Giustiani gave a well-attended speech in which he expostulated on the sinister designs of Rome. In Rochester, New York, on October 15, 1848 at 7:30 p.m. citizens who each paid twelve and a half cents packed into an assembly room to hear the former priest give a lecture. Giustiani emphatically urged his listeners to stop the United States from becoming the "Province of the Pope and Nunneries." That same year Alessandro

¹⁷⁷ "William Hogan," *Boston Recorder* 29, no. 46 (November 14, 1844); "Nunneries and the Confessional," *Boston Recorder* 30, no. 41 (October 9, 1845); Hogan, *Popery!*, 247.

Gavazzi, an apostate priest and revolutionary from Italy whose talks were funded by the American and Foreign Christian Union, accused the Sisters of Charity the world over of being prostitutes. He warned parents not to send their children to convent schools where nuns, “the main tool of the Devil in America,” held court. As unassuming accomplices, the sisters, with “their sweet, engaging manners, their knowledge, and their attractions” gave the false impression of safety. But parents should not be fooled, he advised, warning his listeners to avoid not only convent schools but also exposing their children to domestic servants trained by nuns.¹⁷⁸

Opposition to convent schools in part invigorated the common or public school movement that took off in the 1830s and 40s. Shortly after the burning of Mount Benedict Academy, an article in the *American Ladies' Magazines* offered answers regarding “How to Prevent the Increase of Convents.” While the article condemned the violence against the Ursuline community as “the work of men actuated by unholy passions,” it nevertheless warned against the increase of convent schools. “Jesuits have already established colleges and schools for the education of our youth,” explained the article. “There are about twenty convents, or Catholic female seminaries in our land...with the intention of gaining such an influence...to overthrow and destroy our civil and religious liberties.” As an antidote to this situation, the article’s author suggested not violence or “harsh denunciations,” but rather the founding of “Protestant Schools, which shall possess greater advantages than convents can offer for education of young ladies—or which shall afford the same advantages at a cheaper rate.” While Protestant schools

¹⁷⁸ Rochester *Daily Advertiser* (October 2, 1848) quoted in Frederick J. Zwierlein, “Know Nothingism in Rochester, New York,” in *Historical Records and Studies*, ed. Thomas F. Meehan, et al. vol. 14 (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1920), 23; T. O. Leland, ed., *Father Gavazzi's Lectures in New York, also the Life of Father Gavazzi* 3rd ed. (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1858), 292-295.

per-se did not emerge as a result, public schools in which Protestant principles were instituted, did. “Fear of religious and political dangers, which might arise if the mothers of our land should be educated in convent schools,” explained Elmer Ellsworth Brown in his 1910 *The Making of Our Middle Schools*, infused discussions regarding the establishment of our public schools.¹⁷⁹

To be sure, other reasons compelled reformers such as Horace Mann, the main instigator of the public school movement, to secure free education for the nation’s youth. Disturbed by the lack of quality education available for most Americans, especially the poor, and his conviction that poverty and crime could be solved through right education, Mann upheld schooling as an “absolute right...of every human being” and the “correlative duty of government” to provide. Mann promoted an education system that would instill patriotism, virtue, and a good worth ethic in the nation’s youth. Other reformers followed Mann’s examples to promote common schools in their states. Henry Barnard in Connecticut, Calvin Stowe in Ohio, Caleb Mills in Indiana, John D. Pierce in Michigan, and Calvin Wiley in North Carolina, became convinced, like Mann, that every child in a republic had a right to a publically supported and publically controlled education.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ “How to Prevent the Increase of Convents,” *American Ladies’ Magazine; Containing Original Tales, Essays, Literary & Historical Sketches* 7, no. 11 (November 1834), 518-20; Elmer Ellsworth Brown, *The Making of Our Middle Schools: An Account of the Development of Secondary Education in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1905), 255.

¹⁸⁰ Horace Mann, *Tenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education* (1846) in *Antebellum American Culture*, ed. David Brion Davis (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 40-42; for more on Mann and the common school movement, see Derek Andrew Pacheco, *Moral Enterprise: Literature and Education in Antebellum America* (Columbia: The Ohio State University Press, 2013); Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York School Controversy* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968), 1.

Reformers promoted common schools as Christian. Christian instruction, they believed, would provide the nation's youth with the necessary moral and ethical training. Common school advocates thus had no qualms requiring the use of the Bible in public schools. "It breathes God's laws and presents illustrious examples of conduct," argued Horace Mann. Reformers stipulated the use of the King James Version of the Bible, one they believed every Christian denomination would support. Pennsylvania passed the Free School Act making the King James Bible a compulsory textbook with other states following suit. To prevent criticism of using a sectarian text, school boards stipulated the school Bibles be free from "note and comment." This appealed most groups, but not Catholics who objected to both the King James Version of the Bible and the approach to Scripture that is void of interpretive commentary. Rather than offering non-sectarian, Christian education, they argued that common schools promoted a distinctly Protestant education.¹⁸¹

Debates among Protestants and Catholics over the use of the Bible in schools resulted in the so-called "Bible Wars." Outspoken clergy, like New York's bishop, John Hughes, argued that the public schools' use of the King James Bible and other books that included anti-Catholic slurs, like McDuffy readers with references to "papists," "popery," and "priestcraft," rendered the schools sectarian and dangerous to the faith of Catholic children. One common school text described John Huss as a "zealous reformer from Popery" who foolishly trusted "himself to the deceitful Catholics." Moreover, reading the Holy Scriptures "without note or comment," claimed the vicar general of the diocese, was a decidedly Protestant approach. "The Catholic Church tells her children that they must

¹⁸¹James Pyle Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania, Private and Public, Elementary and Higher* (Lancaster, PA: Inquirer Publishing Co., 1886), 293; see also Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America: Religious Conflict in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 59-60.

be taught their religion by authority,” whereas in public schools “children are allowed to judge for themselves. The Protestant principle is therefore acted upon...and the schools are sectarian.” Hughes also expressed opposition to Catholic tax dollars going to support such schools and requested government funds for Catholic education. Perceiving Hughes’ criticism of the use of the King James Bible as opposition to the Bible altogether and his request for government funds as a violation of the separation of church and state, the New York Public School Society dismissed Hughes’ complaints, while anti-Catholic groups presented Hughes as trying to rob the public treasury to extend Romanism.¹⁸²

The escalating conflict made national headlines and ignited greater anti-Catholicism among Protestant Reformation societies that vowed to keep the Bible in schools. As a result, Bishop John Hughes and Rev. W. C. Brownlee, editor of *The Protestant Vindicator*, president the New York Protestant Association, and former defender of Maria Monk, presented their opposing sides on the debate before the New York Board of Aldermen. For two days the bishop pleaded for public aid for Catholic schools, appealing to freedom of conscience. Following, Rev. Brownlee and two lawyers from the School Society at the North Dutch Church argued that moral education based on “the whole Bible” ought to “satisfy all parties.” Though both sides presented detailed, eloquent, and exhaustive arguments, Hughes and the New York Catholics lost the Bible Wars. On October 29, 1841 the board voted fifteen to one against providing aid to

¹⁸² For a history of the “Bible Wars,” see Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York School Controversy*; and Joseph J. McCadden, “Bishop Hughes versus the Public School Society of New York,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 50, no. 2 (July 1964): 188-207; Thomas T. McAvoy, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 144-5; references to anti-Catholic slurs in school texts from “Petition of the Catholics of New York for a Portion of the Common School Fund: To the Honorable Board of Aldermen of the City of New York, 1840,” in *The School in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed. James W. Fraser (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 77; letter by vicar-general, John Power, dated July 9, 1840, and printed in the *New York Freeman’s Journal* (July 11, 1840).

Catholic schools. Rather than send Catholic children to public schools, however, Hughes claimed Catholics would prefer to pay double to ensure their children's cultural and religious heritage. A defeated Hughes consequently focused his efforts on establishing parochial schools and looked to the city's Sisters of Charity to supply teachers.¹⁸³

In an attempt to strike a conciliatory cord, New York Governor William H. Seward proposed offering an education system where foreigners might be taught by teachers of their same language and faith. Nativist Whigs, however, recoiled at this proposal, arguing that "all foreigners...should be taught at the same schools with the children of native citizens [so that] all distinctions between them should be done away with..." When an angry Hughes continued lambasting the public school system and demanding funding for Catholic education in rallies, speeches, petitions, and broadsides, the Public School System acquiesced to eliminate anti-Catholic books from the schools and remove "note or comment" from Scripture lessons. This compromise, however, pleased neither Protestants, weary of Catholic interference and alleged opposition to the Bible, nor Catholics, whose children would still be exposed to what they perceived as a sectarian approach to faith.¹⁸⁴

The Bible Wars played out in other American cities, including Philadelphia. Philadelphia's bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick bemoaned the lack of Catholic education for the growing number of the city's Catholic immigrants and the sectarianism schools offered. As a solution, Kenrick requested that Catholic children be permitted to read from

¹⁸³ McCadden, "Bishop Hughes versus the Public School Society of New York," 200; a description of the debate between Hughes and Brownlee was printed in "Popery in New York," *Christian Observer* 20, no. 31 (July 30, 1841); Henry J. Bourne, ed. "The Archdiocese of New York a Century Ago; a Memoir of Archbishop Hughes, 1838-1858," *Historical Records and Studies*, (1952), 236.

¹⁸⁴ William H. Seward and George E. Baker, *The Works of William H. Seward* v. 2 (New York: Redfield, 1861), 215; "Seward's Message. Its Misrepresentations and Perversions Exposed," *Argus Extra* (Albany, January 1840); McCadden, 199-202.

their own Bibles while Protestant students were taught from the KJV. In the heated debate that followed, Kenrick felt compelled to clarify this position. “Catholics have not asked that the Bible be excluded from the Public Schools. They have merely desired for the liberty of using the Catholic version. . . . They only desire to enjoy the benefit of the Constitution of the State of Pennsylvania, which guarantees the rights of conscience and precludes any preferences of sectarian modes of worship.” But public school advocates mostly feared a Catholic conspiracy to try to control the nation’s youth by keeping them from the word of God. “It appears,” explained the *Christian Observer*, that bishop Kenrick “considers the Bible a dangerous book!” Kenrick and “his brethren,” the article continued, “are *afraid* of it, and they express their fears in the form of conscientious scruples against the use of it. They dare not have their children read it and hear it.”¹⁸⁵

The actual Catholic position on the Bible and the lived experience of Catholics hardly reflected the portrayal in convent narratives or the hype surrounding the “Bible Wars.” American bishops repeatedly endorsed lay Scripture reading. Although this was hardly something new, after the First Provincial Council of Baltimore in 1829, they issued a pastoral letter to the laity which encouraged them to “seek daily” the Scriptures, but not to approach the Bible with “arrogant self-sufficiency” as it contained “some things hard to understand.” The Mass and Divine Office—prayers said daily by nuns and priests—were also inundated with Scripture. The difference between Protestants and Catholics in relation to the Bible really rested on translation and approach. Catholic clergy warned against “unauthorized versions” and an emphasis on the importance of

¹⁸⁵ Kenrick letter in *Catholic Herald* (March 14, 1844); Thomas J. Donaghy, *Philadelphia’s Finest: A History of Education in the Catholic Archdiocese, 1692-1970* (Philadelphia: The American Catholic Historical Society, 1972), 60-1; “The Bible a Dangerous Book!” *Christian Observer* 22, no. 5 (February 3, 1843), 18.

tradition. Less optimistic about individual ability to interpret the Bible for one's self and concerned with maintaining orthodoxy, Catholic clergy were leery of certain translations and the efforts on behalf of Protestants to disseminate them. After a Protestant Bible Society distributed a number of KJV Bibles to Catholics, one Catholic priest publically burned them—a poor PR move, but one that revealed the extent to which people took these differences seriously.¹⁸⁶

The “Bible Wars” further entrenched Protestant-Catholic differences and reinforced the portrayal in convent narratives of Catholics being opposed to the Bible altogether. The belief that convent schools “estranged the hearts of children from their Bibles,” motivated American Protestants to scorn education by women religious.

Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery exhibited a mother superior entirely ignorant of the Bible, being outsmarted by a young Protestant pupil regarding the Scripture's teachings. Narrating the passage, McCrindell explained the superior “had probably never read any part of the Bible herself, except the few extracts in her prayer book” and that she was not “allowed to even look at [the Bible] for herself.” With “constant vigilance” to keep pupils ignorant of the Scriptures, explained McCrindell further, convent school authorities held their “prey...successfully entangled in their net.” Biblical ignorance warned convent narratives, led to conversion to Catholicism and women becoming nuns.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ “The Pastoral Letter to the Clergy of 1829,” and “The Pastoral Letter to the Laity of 1829,” in Peter Guilday, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792-1919* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1923), 45, 28-9. As early 1790, Mathew Carey, a prominent publisher and Catholic, began printing American editions of the Douay-Rheims Bible with the blessing of John Carroll, first Bishop of Baltimore. For more on this, see Michael S. Carter, “‘Under the Benign Sun of Toleration’: Mathew Carey, the Douai Bible, and Catholic Print Culture, 1789-1791,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 437-469; for information on the “Champlain Bible Burning,” see Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 157-8.

¹⁸⁷ Josephine M. Bunkley, *The Testimony of an Escaped Novice from the Sisterhood of St. Joseph* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 269; McCrindell, 271-4.

Without the aid of the Bible, naïve, trusting children fell prey to Romanism. “A young and thoughtless girl whose mind is naturally fond of novelty,” wrote McCrindell, was the most susceptible to popery.¹⁸⁸ According to convent narratives, crafty nuns and priests lured simple, trusting children with gifts and flattery. To get Protestant girls to attend confession, priests offered them “sweet meats, pictures, and *bon bons*.” In addition, nuns and priests resorted to flattery to win young converts. In *Popish Nunneries*, Hogan claimed that the mother superior, “a constitutional hypocrite,” lavished praise on young pupils in the convent schools, telling them “they are beautiful, fascinating, and they look like angels.” In *Luzette* the superior won children’s hearts through her “excessive praise” of them. Inflated by such notions, argued Hogan, the young girls very often “decide to be a nun.”¹⁸⁹

As a way of persuading young girls to consider life as a nun, students were taken to observe daily life in neighboring convents. In *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* pupils visited the hospital of the Nuns of St. Thomas. Observing her students’ reactions to the industrious care the nuns exhibited toward the infirm, the mother superior, exclaimed, “I see that my young friends are struck with admiration, and I am sure they would feel much inclined to follow your example.” Resistant to such tactics, and dismissing the vigilance of the nuns at the hospital, the protagonist of this story recalled Romans 10:3, “For they, being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God.” Fearful that young girls might be enamored with the life of the nun through the sisters’ supposed

¹⁸⁸ McCrindell, preface; Culbertson, *Rosamond or, A narrative of the captivity and suffering of an American female under the popish priests*, 8; McCrindell, 27.

¹⁸⁹ McCrindell, 227; Hogan, *Popery!*, 248, 247; Weston, *Luzette*, 12.

devotion to God or engagement in charitable acts, anti-convent literature quickly denounced the vocation as self-righteous—nothing more than a display to recruit new members.¹⁹⁰

Supposedly cut off from the simple truth of the Bible, convent pupils became dazzled by smells, bells, holidays, and images. “The nuns were very skillful in making converts,” explained one convent narrative, “and their ceremonies well-calculated to captivate the minds of young people.” Protestant pupils who had not enough time at home to learn their Bibles, wilted before “all these ceremonies, especially kneeling...[which had] a strong hold on the imagination.” Nuns “transfixed” the young girls with their singing, placing them under “a spell no sensible soul could resist.” The highly anti-Catholic *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, contended convent schools “were particularly adapted to dazzle and deceive” without the use of “words.” In *The Nun of St. Ursula* the narrator beseeched a young woman recently entering a convent to “Awake! Free thyself from the infatuated spells, with which thou art bound, and abjure the false dogmas and superstitions of papal power!”¹⁹¹

In this vein, many Protestants warned against the alluring accoutrements of another religious tradition that raised considerable alarm in the 1840s: Mormonism. Founded by Joseph Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints attracted followers intrigued by Smith’s assertions of having received divine revelations, the “discovery” of a new Bible inscribed on golden tablets, and the search for Zion on earth. William Hogan grouped “Mormonites” with “Papists” and “popish nunneries,”

¹⁹⁰ McCrindell, 217-8.

¹⁹¹ McCrindell, 219, 196, 138; Samuel D. Miller, “The Dangers of Education in Roman Catholic Seminaries,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 4, no. 5 (May 1838); Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula*, preface.

forecasting “all will have their day, and so will common sense.” Opponents equated the religious hierarchy of Mormonism and Catholicism and associated Joseph Smith and later Brigham Young with the pope as “tyrants” who deluded followers. Criticism of Mormon polygamy sounded very much like suspicions of sexual corruptions in convents. The murder of Joseph Smith in 1844 and the Philadelphia Riots occurring that same year were rooted in the same agenda to protect Protestant America.¹⁹²

Critics of Catholicism and Mormonism believed that both faith traditions lured the vulnerable, especially young women, into their groups through elaborate pageantry and appeals to emotion. Pointing to similarities among anti-Catholics and anti-Mormons, David Brion Davis contended that for opponents, “Roman Catholic sacraments and Mormon revelations were preposterous hoaxes used delude the naïve.”¹⁹³ While dissimilar in many obvious ways, Mormonism and Catholicism nevertheless both appealed to the senses through elaborate ritual, imagery, and sacraments. Like Catholicism, the Church of the Latter Day Saints offered a “tangible” faith. It provided the saints with a sacred landscape in America, a golden Bible, and elaborate temple rites of baptism, ordination, and councils. Opponents saw the *forms* of these religions, contrary to the *abstract* faith of “true religion,” as tools that led the unenlightened astray. Children in convent schools were especially susceptible to such pageantry as were young women confronted by Mormon missionaries.

¹⁹² Hogan, *Poperly!*, 320; David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (Sept. 1960), 207.

¹⁹³ Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature,” 216.

The appearance of Mormon captivity narratives further demonstrated the similar ways Protestants and non-members viewed the “saints” and “papists.” Mormon exposé, *Awful Disclosures of Mormonism and Its Mysteries* blatantly borrowed its title from the most popular convent narrative, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Convent* by Maria Monk. *Awful Disclosures of Mormonism* told of a young woman seduced by a handsome and charming Mormon man. He convinced her to convert to Mormonism, intentionally keeping the practice of polygamy a secret, and travel with him to Utah where he promised to marry her. Once in Zion, however, the man abandoned the young woman who was then placed on the auction block to be chosen by another Mormon man. After poking and prodding her naked flesh, a decidedly less appealing man chose the young woman as one of his many wives. She lived a miserable life, trying and failing both to escape and kill herself. Finally when her husband died, she returned to her childhood home and wrote her story as a warning to “innocent women.” Like convent narratives, *Awful Disclosures of Mormonism* presented life among the Mormons as one that threatened “the purity and beauty” of a young woman by throwing her into “a world of vice and uncontrolled wickedness.”¹⁹⁴

Similar Mormon “exposés,” focusing on the Mormon threat to female purity through polygamy became popular throughout the nineteenth century, including *Wife No. 19, or, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism, and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy* (1875). Like convent narratives, this story offered an insider’s perspective on deviant practices among a non-Protestant group, extending tantalizing details within the rhetoric of warning and

¹⁹⁴ N.A., *Awful Disclosures of Mormonism and Its Mysteries* (Printed for the Booksellers, 1860), New York Public Library.

rebuke.¹⁹⁵ The perceived threat of Mormonism only increased the sense of a broader conspiracy against Protestantism and the American way that was the basis of anti-Catholicism and prejudice against nuns and convents. Indeed the count-subversive movements against Mormons, Catholics, and “nunneries,” reinforced one another.

Convents, convent schools, and Mormon men all robbed the nation of virtuous wives and mothers. Mormons allowed for multiple wives, a “perversion” that threatened the virtue-fostering influence of the home. *Awful Disclosures of Mormonism and Wife No. 19* both displayed the domestic and moral ruin that resulted from polygamy. Likewise, anti-Catholic literature warned that convent schools made women ill-prepared for the role of wife and mother. “For a young girl educated in a convent to be a good wife and a good mother is a thing most rare,” explained *The Escaped Nun*. “Such a person cannot be a good mother, because, not educated in the family, she knows nothing of domestic life. She cannot be a good housekeeper, because the superintendence of a household is something to her quite new. Few are the husbands who have not speedy cause to repent of marrying a young girl just out of the convent.”¹⁹⁶ Both Mormonism and Popery threatened American democracy, religion, and the family, thus invoking a similar counter-response among nativists, anti-Mormons, and anti-Catholics.

Yet with the growth of its schools, churches, and adherents, the papal plot appeared more imminent than the Mormon menace. Taken together, the dangers of convents, convent schools, and Catholic education were far too great for any Protestant

¹⁹⁵ Anna Eliza Young, “Brigham Young’s Apostate Wife,” *Wife No. 19, or, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism, and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy* (Hartford, Conn.: Dustin, Gilman & Co., 1875).

¹⁹⁶ Bunkley, 319.

parent to risk. *Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery*, summarized these dangers, exclaiming,

Thrown into the midst of ungodly society, continually exposed to...the fatal influence of irreligion, surrounded by the evils of superstition...having no experienced friend to guide her steps through the mazes of temptation...and deprived of the smallest portion of leisure, which may have enabled her to cultivate by religious exercises those Christian graces which she so much needed, and that habitual nearness to God, which alone could form the safeguard of her soul—thus situated...could it be a subject of wonder that...the fearful clouds of despondency had now threatened her reason and her very life?¹⁹⁷

Such a life imperiled a young girl's future domestic happiness and her eternal soul and robbed the nation of a future wife and mother to instill virtue in America.

In April of 1841 many Philadelphia Protestants felt confirmed in their belief of a Catholic conspiracy to keep the word of God from the nation's children when a Catholic school teacher in Philadelphia refused to read the King James Version of the Bible to her students. When the school board fired her for this, the city's bishop, Francis Patrick Kenrick, blasted the public school system. Kenrick claimed he did not support keeping religion out of schools entirely but that avoiding sectarian proselytizing was nearly impossible. He referred to rights of religious liberty "against the stratagems of fanatics" and proclaimed "The reading of the Protestant version of the Bible is unlawful and no Catholic parent can permit his children to use it as a schoolbook or otherwise." Like Protestants who feared the "pernicious" influence of convent schools on the nation's

¹⁹⁷ McCrindell, 82.

children, Kenrick argued “The effort to bias the tender minds of children is so constant it is vain to talk of religious liberty.” After a heated exchange in the city’s newspapers, in January 1843, the Philadelphia School Board ruled that Catholic children could read a Bible other than the King James Version as long as it excluded “note or comment.” This automatically disqualified the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible, however, which contained interpretive notes on the text, further escalating the controversy.¹⁹⁸

The ruling pleased neither Protestants nor Catholics. Nativists and anti-Catholics in Philadelphia, as in New York, characterized Catholics as completely opposed to the Bible and the alleged religious heritage of the U.S. After the Philadelphia school board suspended a teacher for reading the King James Bible before a “mixed” class of Protestant and Catholic children in 1844, the American Republican Association mobilized in response. Among other measures, the party pledged to maintain the use of the “Bible in public schools as a reading book.” The debate heightened already growing tensions among Philadelphia’s native-born citizens and Irish immigrants, resulting in three days of violence in May, 1844. What became known as the Philadelphia Riots cost over a quarter of a million dollars in damages and the lives of at least twenty-four people.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America*, 60; “Education,” *Catholic Herald* (March 21, 1839), 60-3; *Catholic Herald* (November 25, 1841).

¹⁹⁹ Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study in Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), ix, 115-116; Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America*, 71. Oxx provides a thorough overview of the Riots in her chapter entitled “The Philadelphia Bible Riots,” and argues for the centrality of religion in the event; for another work that analyzes the significance of religion in the “Bible Wars” and ensuing Riots, see Tracy Fessenden, “The Nineteenth-Century Bible Wars and the Separation of Church and State,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 74, no. 4 (December 2005): 784-811; for an examination of the Riots in the context of neighborhood labor conflicts, see David Montgomery, “The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 4 (1972): 411-446.

The Native American Republican Association, which would merge into the American Party, or the Know Nothings, by the 1850s, built their platform in the 1840s on two issues: the restriction of the political rights of immigrants and Protestant control of public schools. At this time they could rightly accuse both Democrats and Whigs of pandering to the Irish vote. Members of the party believed wholeheartedly in the “purity of the voting box,” and sought to salvage this American tradition from manipulation. Political machines that preyed on immigrants represented corruption along with the fear that the immigrant vote was informed by “priestly dictation.” The aspirations of preserving the dignity of the franchise was ahead of its time and contributed to future voting reforms that helped to break apart political machines. But during the Philadelphia Riots, the party members focused more on burning Catholic churches and convents.²⁰⁰

Members of the Native American Republicans consisted of a well-organized upper-to-middle class leadership and a comparatively unorganized working-class nativist rank and file. Though the group was diverse, they were united by certain cultural values, including hyper-American patriotism, Protestant dogmatism, a belief in an ordered society, and faith in the power of right education. Catholic education, especially by convent academies, along with the influx of impoverished Catholic immigrants, appeared to threaten this vision for society. What made the party distinct from Democrats and Whigs was its insistence that a foreign conspiracy was underway to overthrow American political institutions. While the overarching fear in this regard centered on the pope, whom party members believed was colluding with European figureheads to destroy American freedom through the franchise, many feared that the process began and was at

²⁰⁰ Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844*, 49, 77.

work in schools. In the classroom Catholic emissaries could tamper with the malleable minds of the nation's Protestant youth.²⁰¹ It was thus no coincidence that the riots broke out in the midst of the school-related "Bible Wars."

The fighting first broke out when a group of Irish men interrupted an American Republican Party meeting being held in Kensington. Members of the American Republican Party had met specifically to address the topic of the school debates. Before becoming a part of Philadelphia, Kensington was in the heart of an Irish neighborhood. The Irish intruders heckled the speakers and the crowd of over 300 people before attempting to tear down the platform. The nativists retreated, but re-scheduled their meeting for the next day. When that meeting, which attracted over 3,000 people, was interrupted by a rain storm, members of the crowd ran for shelter to the Nanny Goat Market in an all-Irish neighborhood. The Irish blocked their entrance before the groups started fighting in the streets, from one end to the next of the Market. The following day nativists returned to Kensington, setting fire to a row of Irish homes on Cadwalader Street as some of the Irish fired at nativists from their windows. It was not until the militia arrived around 5:00 p.m. that the fighting finally stopped.²⁰²

While the fires ignited on the first day of the riots represented more personal conflicts among nativists and the Irish who had lived and worked next to each other for years, the nativists soon thereafter unleashed their wrath on the city's Sisters of Charity. They began their terror by starting a fire next to the fence surrounding the convent and

²⁰¹ Feldberg, 51, 64.

²⁰² Feldberg, 99; Bochanski, ed., *Our Faith-Filled Heritage: The Church of Philadelphia Bicentennial as a Diocese*, 52. David H. Bennett argues that the school controversy was the main cause of the Philadelphia riots in *Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, revised and updated (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 56.

throwing stones through the building's windows. The sisters were absent from the convent at the time, having taken up an assignment in Iowa. But when the caretaker, Mrs. Baker, came to the door, someone in the crowd threw a rock, striking her in the head. As nativists continued to "kindle a fire for burning [the adjoining] school house," they were "saluted with a new halt pecks of Irish bullets." According to one paper, a member of the Irish mob shot a man "through the heart." This apparently precluded further destruction of the convent. By the time the nativist and Irish rioters retreated from the convent grounds they left two casualties behind.²⁰³

During the second day of the riots, nativists targeted St. Michael's parish. Like the mob that attacked the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, the rioters in Philadelphia set fire to the building's interior, pulled up shrubbery on the grounds, and turned over old graves in the church cemetery. One man claimed he acted on behalf "of the stars and the stripes." From here, they returned to the convent of the Sisters of Charity, torching the building without hesitation. By this time local authorities got involved, with militia units fanning out into the city as Philadelphia was placed under martial law. Thousands of citizens met in the State House and formed a "Peace Police" to aid the militia. After authorities dispersed the riots, one onlooker wrote, "Since noon this day one nunnery, one school, seven houses... and three large Catholic churches have been burned to the ground." The *Philadelphia Ledger* later reported the total damage done to the churches ran over thirty thousand dollars, and the overall damage from the riots, which included the Irish homes on Cadwalader Street, to be over one hundred thousand. Two months after the riots, a nativist-dominated Grand Jury placed the blame for the

²⁰³ "The Philadelphia Riots," *Barre Gazette* 11, no. 2 (May 24, 1844); "Great Riot in Philadelphia," *Farmer's Cabinet* 42, no. 39 (May 16, 1844); Feldberg, 99 – 106.

violence on poor law enforcement and the attempts of the Irish to exclude the Bible from public schools.²⁰⁴

At the time of the Philadelphia Riots only two convent academies and a handful of diocesan schools existed in the city. The Ladies of the Sacred Heart operated a boarding school and the Sisters of Charity ran St. Paul's Female Academy and a free Day School for orphan girls. A year before the riots broke out, Bishop Kenrick lamented "Education here is in a sad condition. The Public Schools are everywhere conducted in a way to leave the children without any religious impression, or to impress them with sectarian views." *The Catholic Herald* likewise asked why so little was done "to secure an education for Catholic boys." While most of the churches in the diocese had "schools of Christian Doctrine" attached to them, there was still a paucity of schools for Catholic boys and girls. Instead of responding to the "threat" of Catholic education, the Philadelphia Riots served to jumpstart what would become the monolith of parochial schools in Philadelphia. Bishop Kenrick poured his efforts into creating free parochial schools as a counter to public schools—something that would later be considered his greatest achievement—inviting a series of Catholic teaching sisters to run the schools.²⁰⁵ This chronology suggests that nativist rioters responded more to the perceived threat of Catholic infringement in public schools and Catholic educational opportunities rather than the reality of such competition.

To celebrate their victory, American Republicans put on a lavish parade through Philadelphia's streets on July Fourth. Considered the most impressive parade in the city's

²⁰⁴ "Great Riot in Philadelphia," *Farmer's Cabinet*. *Philadelphia Ledger* quoted in "Great Riot in Philadelphia"; Feldberg, 111 – 115, 113; Oxx, 72.

²⁰⁵ Donaghy, *Philadelphia's Finest*, 35-6, 60-1; Bishop Kenrick quoted in Donaghy, 36; *The Catholic Herald* (April 5, 1838).

history, the marchers displayed banners and busts and trooped to the sound of a triumphant band. One banner portrayed Columbia, the goddess of Liberty, with an American flag draped around her shoulders and an open Bible in her hand, the image symbolizing the school debate among the city's immigrant and native born citizens. Above lady liberty's head perched an eagle holding a banner in its mouth that read "Beware of Foreign Influence." A serpent lay beneath lady liberty's feet, symbolizing the defeat of Rome, akin to images of Mary with the Satan serpent crushed underfoot. Another banner displayed the face of George Washington's mother, with the inscription: "To Mary, Mother of Washington."²⁰⁶ In opposition to Catholic elevation of the Virgin Mary, "Mother of God," stood the mother of Washington and Columbia, two women, melded into one, representing the new Mary, the American Mary. Her male followers were patriots, not papists, and her female heirs were wives and mothers, not nuns.

The year the riots broke out, the Irish made up ten percent of Philadelphia's population. Throughout the 1830s an average of twenty thousand Irish immigrants reached American shores per year. Numbers spiked in the early 1840s, reaching thirty six thousand in 1841 and over fifty thousand the following year. Their accents, poverty, religion, the buildings they established on American soil, and the factory jobs they took made them conspicuous among Philadelphia's native born. Most of the city's nativists were skilled workers who in times past enjoyed a mostly stable income and were raised to believe that if they worked hard they would get paid accordingly. They watched on helplessly as more and more machines were introduced that could perform the same work they had always done by hand, and more efficiently too. Most of the Irish newcomers

²⁰⁶ Feldberg, 136 – 138.

were unskilled or semi-skilled young single men and women. They arrived virtually penniless and most of the men took work digging canals, hauling freight, and manning machines in the city's growing manufacturing centers. As the city's nativists were put out of work and observed the demographic changes in their city, it was easy to pin the blame on a conspicuous group who seemed to be ruining everything.²⁰⁷

A sense of separateness and unity also sprung up among Irish immigrants. Irish Catholics brought with them a deep hatred for the English and for Irish Protestants from their experiences in the homeland. The discrimination they faced back home, which was intrinsically bound with religious belief, only reinforced Irish loyalty to Catholicism. In his description of Philadelphia's Irish, Michael Feldberg argued, "Anti-English and anti-landlord hostility was inseparably bound up with professions of faith in Catholicism." Perhaps because of the tumultuous setting from which they came, most Irish immigrants also set themselves apart by exhibiting a tendency toward violence, something that contributed to hatred directed their way. Places of congenial gathering that confirmed Irish identity and solidarity were almost always the local pub and the church. As alcohol was a main facet of both venues, Irish felt personally affronted by temperance reformers. The association of the Irish with the pub and the pew also explains why these venues were targeted by the nativist rioters. This intentional sequestering among the Irish and their tendency toward violence only reinforced the nativists' fear that the newcomers could not be assimilated into American culture.²⁰⁸

Although most members of the Protestant clergy abstained from vigilante violence against immigrants and convents, the rhetoric of some of them, especially in

²⁰⁷ Feldberg, 20; Bochanski, 99.

²⁰⁸ Feldberg, 22, 33, 24, 19.

public lectures, legitimized these actions. Philadelphia's own Rev. Joseph F. Berg gathered large audiences to listen to his expostulations on concubine nuns, frequent infanticide of the alleged offspring of nuns and priests, and the ubiquitous subterranean passages that connected convents with priests' seminaries and parsonages. While clergymen like Berg did not join the ranks of the Native American Republicans, they did unite to form the American Protestant Association (APA). Founded in Philadelphia, the APA grew to be a national organization and one of the most virulently anti-Catholic associations. In 1842 Philadelphia boasted of over fifty local clergymen in the APA. They took it upon themselves to warn the public of the pernicious inroads of Rome through the public lecture circuit, publications, revival meetings, and Sunday schools. Rev. William Hogan, the former priest of Philadelphia's St. Mary's church, was one of the most famous members, giving lectures on "Romanism and nunneries" throughout the 1830s and 1840s. In 1843, the Association's Annual Report announced their dedication to protect the King James Bible in public schools by "stand[ing] ready on any suitable occasion which may be given."²⁰⁹

Michael Feldberg, in his history of the Philadelphia Riots, contended that the native-born Philadelphians "turned to evangelical Protestantism and anti-immigration politics to make their stand against personal oblivion." He meticulously placed the riots within a wider context to show that the fighting stemmed from ethnic tension, "rather than simply religious conflict." Yet religion appeared to be much more than a mere tool used by nativists to regain control of their lives. Although Feldberg's analysis offers the most thorough and well-researched explanation of Philadelphia Riots available, his focus

²⁰⁹ Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America*, 57-8; "Annual Report of the American Protestant Association" (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1843).

on social and economic factors overlooks the role of religion. The riots broke out in the immediate context of the “Bible Wars” and the popularity of convent narratives and other anti-Catholic texts. Nativists attacked all of the nine Catholic churches in Philadelphia and the city’s only convent at the time of the riots. Some of the Irish Protestants even fought alongside the city’s nativists. Sister M. Gonzaga, who worked at Saint Joseph’s Asylum in Philadelphia during the riots, wrote to her mother on May 9, 1844. “The truth is,” she argued, “it is nothing but a party of Protestants leagued against the Catholics under the name of Native Americans and the Irish. It is believed to be actually more religion than politics which is the cause of the riot.”²¹⁰

More broadly, religious debates that permeated antebellum America helped Philadelphia residents to make sense of the changing world around them. The members of the mob had likely been taught from an early age that Catholicism stood opposed to the ideals of democracy and the republic. As Catholic immigrants flooded their shores, they read reports and listened to lectures that placed the blame for the poverty and ignorance of the newcomers on their religion. Rumors of Catholic organizations, like the Leopold Society in Vienna, sending hordes of impoverished immigrants to do the bidding of Rome and steal the birthright of native born Americans, permeated the press and lecture circuit from the 1820s through to the time of the riots. They likely read anti-convent literature, in books or in articles, which described Catholic men, especially priests, as subhuman fiends ruled by lust and greed. Conspiracies that Catholics sought to spread their influence through the education system appeared evident in the city’s “Bible Wars.” While the burning of the Sisters of Charity convent was not the main focus of the

²¹⁰ Feldberg, 47, ix. Surprisingly, Feldberg’s *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844* is the only monograph exclusively dedicated to the event. Oxx, 78-9; Sister M. Gonzaga, “Letter, May 9, 1844,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 80, no. 2-3 (1969): 109, cited in Oxx, 79.

riots, it was no accident that a convent was among the objects of wrath during the riots. Convent schools especially symbolized the antithesis to Protestant-influenced public schools, even though relatively few convent academies or Catholic diocesan schools existed at the time. This is not to say that economic conditions played no role, but the way in which the rioters on both sides understood their economic context was through extreme religious tension on both sides.

As in New York, the Philadelphia diocese responded to the Bible Wars and the 1844 Riots by establishing parochial schools. Bishop Kenrick worked to establish a separate school system as a counterpart to Protestant common schools. To equip these schools with teachers, Kenrick invited a number of women religious to Philadelphia, making the city home to the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Ladies of the Sacred Heart, the Visitation Sisters, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Thus in an atmosphere of fierce debate over the “correct” version of the Bible, religious sectarianism, in part spurred by convent schools, contributed to some of the longest lasting school systems in the United States, both public and parochial.²¹¹

Fear of Catholic infiltration through schools and their targeting of the nation’s most vulnerable citizens, women and children, set the tone for the more conspiratorial nativism of the 1850s, most evident in the formation of the Know Nothing Party. The extension of more “respectable” convent narratives reflected the growth of anti-Catholicism and opposition to nuns and convent life. The proliferation of Protestant and nativist societies represented a growing sense of alarm. By the end of the decade the American Protestant Union, formed under the leadership of Samuel F. B. Morse, sought

²¹¹ Oxx, 74-5; for more on the development of Philadelphia’s parochial schools, see Donaghy, *Philadelphia’s Finest*.

to unite all anti-Catholic societies into one national organization. Throughout the decade all three of the mainline Protestant denominations, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, penned formal declarations in opposition to Catholicism and the religion's various manifestations in the U.S. The Presbyterian General Assembly resolved in 1841 to not support or encourage "popish schools" in any manner "directly or indirectly."²¹² Protestant associations and nativist organizations continued to grow into the national coalition of the Know-Nothing or American Party which would take American politics by storm by the 1850s. The steady production of convent narratives, appealing to wide-ranging concerns about education, theology, and the perils presented before children and young women in convent schools and the monastic life, united nativists and Protestants in their opposition to Catholicism more than ever before.

Foreshadowing the terms of the debate between Rome and America in the following decade, William Hogan described Catholicism and convents as a truly national threat. He compared convents to a "demon bird...plunging its poisoned beak into the very vitals of our national existence." This demonic fowl, the antithesis of the American bald eagle, "stopped here and stopped there...with the sole view of giving its spread more momentum until it encompasses the whole length of our country."²¹³ The focus on protecting the nation's children from such a force made readers fear for the future of the nation in a new way. As the number of Catholics increased and stubbornly insisted on educating their children in their own schools, nativists feared a mongrelization of the country. This coupled with the popularity of convent schools among the nation's Protestant citizens only reified the impending disaster if someone did not take action.

²¹² Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 167, 175.

²¹³ Hogan, *Popery!*, 264.

Though the Mexican-American War overshadowed most other national concerns in the late 1840s, it would not be long before voters mobilized legislators to move, giving authority to those with the most power to act against the nation's interests.

CHAPTER FOUR

BENEATH THE FAÇADE: CONVENT TALES, CITY MYSTERIES, AND THE RISE OF DARK LANTERN POLITICS

We don't believe in Nunneries, where beauty that was made to bloom and beam on the world is immured and immolated, not to say prostituted. —The Wide Awake Gift: A Know-Nothing Token for 1855

After a brief season of hollow pleasure, ...she sinks willingly to the lowest type of human degradation—the public prostitute; the pure and gentle woman, capable of all high holy duties and affections as wife and mother ...goes in utter recklessness of herself and all the world to add one more to that frightful phalanx of female depravity which is the terror and curse of an enfeebled and depraved civilization. —George Lippard, *New York by Gas-Light* (1856)

In 1854 the American or Know-Nothing Party stormed the political arena. For over a decade members of nativist fraternal organizations had met secretly in homes and lodges to discuss disturbing changes in America: immigration, urban vice, the growth of Catholicism, lack of employment for “real” Americans, and political corruption. The sudden coalescence of these groups into one powerful political party took the public by surprise. “Who was so wild, or so enthusiastic, as to dream that a party unheard of at the last election, operating through invisible agencies...would suddenly spring up...[and] absorb the elective strength of the State?” asked William Lloyd Garrison after the Massachusetts’ state elections. Throughout the nation voters elected forty-three representatives and five senators from the American Party. While most Know-Nothing victories appeared in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic States, and Midwest, their influence even extended south, into states such as Kentucky and Maryland.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Thomas R. Whitney, one of the original members of the Order of United Americans, later recalled the organization’s code of principles in his *A Defense of the American Policy, As Opposed to the Encroachments of Foreign Influence, and Especially to the Interference of the Papacy in the Political Interests and Affairs of the United States*, (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1856), 257-66; W. L. Garrison, “Triumph of ‘Know-Nothingism’,” *Liberator* 24, no 46 (November 17, 1854), 182; David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, Revised and

Mostly remembered for promoting anti-immigrant legislation in an effort to “keep America American,” the Know-Nothing Party also rallied Americans against convents, or what nativists called “Catholic institutions where women are forever barred from leaving.” Thomas R. Whitney, leading member and chief ideologist of the nativist party, commemorated Maria Monk’s convent exposé *Awful Disclosures*, a book he claimed “almost everyone has heard of,” and promoted the publication of *The Escaped Nun* in 1855 as a work “the Jesuits cannot suppress.” Nativists described nuns as a waste of womanhood and convents as enclaves of “Popish” despotism, set off from the arm of the law. John Dowling, another prominent nativist, argued that under their “veil of concealment,” convents were all “dark prison houses of slavery, corruption, and despair.” Reflecting the pervasive hostility toward convent life by the 1850s, various states even sponsored “Nunnery Committees” for the investigation of convents.²¹⁵ More than merely tangential, opposition to convents proved to be a point of consensus and support among Know Nothings, a feeling that tied together anti-Catholicism, gender concerns, and nativism.

Updated (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 153, 142-3; for a thorough discussion of the rise of the Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts (a particular stronghold), see John R. Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People’s Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990); for works on Know Nothing popularity in the South, see W. Darrell Overdyke, *The Know-Nothing Party in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950); Arthur C. Cole, “Nativism in the Lower Mississippi Valley,” *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association*, ed. Benjamin F. Shambaugh (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1913); Sister Agnes Geraldine McGann, *Nativism in Kentucky to 1860* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1944); and Dale T. Knobel, “America for Americans”: *The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 95-7.

²¹⁵ Whitney, *A Defense of American Policy, as Opposed to the Encroachment of Foreign Influence*, 372, 371; John Dowling, *The History of Romanism, From Its Earliest Corruptions of Christianity to the Present Time* (New York: Edward Walker, 1853), 812; for a description of the Massachusetts’ Nunnery Committee, see John L. Mulkern, “Scandal Behind Convent Walls: The Know-Nothing Nunnery Committee of 1855,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 11, no. 1 (1983): 22-34; Whitney, 371; for more on Whitney, see Knobel, *America for Americans*, 88-89.

Almost twenty years of anti-convent literature primed the nation for officially sanctioned nunnery investigations. It was time to find out once and for all whether or not priests and nuns cloistered women against their will, performed infanticide against their illegitimate offspring, and satiated their every lust. By the 1850s, average Americans had been indoctrinated into anti-Catholicism, having learned words such as “popery,” “papist,” and “Jesuitism” from their school textbooks. Even if their parents forbid their reading Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* for its salacious content, they had certainly heard about the book and its lurid details. Religious and secular newspapers alike continually informed the public of a papal conspiracy underway against the United States. History texts, travel guides, gift books, theological tracts, and nativist works stoked the flame of suspicion, hatred, and intrigue of Rome and her “priests’ prisons for women.” Convent narratives, such as Charles Frothingham’s *The Convent’s Doom* (1854) and Josephine Bunkley’s *The Escaped Nun* (1855) became instant best-sellers in the decade. And famed preachers, such as Edward Beecher, toured the country calling for revival and resistance to Catholicism—that Whore of Babylon—and her unbiblical institutions, nunneries.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Ray Allen Billington, “Saving the Children for Protestantism, 1840-1844,” in *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*, Ray Allen Billington (1938; repr., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 142-66; Sister Marie Leonore Fell, *The Foundations of Nativism in American Textbooks, 1783-1860* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1941); Charles W. Frothingham, *The Convent’s Doom: A Story of Charlestown in 1834* (Boston: Graves and Weston, 1854); *The Convent’s Doom* sold 40,000 copies in the first week of publication and went through five editions in its first year; Josephine M. Bunkley, *The Testimony of an Escaped Novice from the Sisterhood of St. Joseph* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855); Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, 345; Edward Beecher, *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed* (Boston: Sterns & Co., 1855); for details on another popular preacher, a former priest who became anti-Catholic street preacher, see T. O. Leland, ed., *Father Gavazzi’s Lectures in New York, also the Life of Father Gavazzi* 3rd ed. (New York: DeWitt & Davenport, 1858); and Augustine J. Curley, “The Image of the Roman Catholic Church in Protestant Street Preaching of the 1850s,” Paper presented at the Conference on Faith and History, Gordon College, October 4 – 6, 2012.

Convent narratives of the 1850s reflected the more political and conspiratorial ethos of the decade. While authors of previous narratives prefaced their works as a warning to young girls and their mothers against the pitfalls of convent life, tales of the 1850s warned the nation and called citizens to action. Using more legal rhetoric, authors described priests as “criminals,” nuns as “prisoners,” and convents as “prisons.” In 1853, Andrew Cross, a Presbyterian minister and co-editor of the anti-Catholic *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, published a series of letters calling for public protection of “imprisoned” nuns. In the compiled letters under the title *Priests’ Prisons for Women*, he focused on the story of Olevia Neal who left a Carmelite convent in Maryland in 1839. “What has become of Olevia Neal?” he asked, suggesting she might have been “immersed in mortar up to [her] neck.” Cross even compared convents to debtor’s prison. “Our State has abolished imprisonment of men for debt,” he wrote to one of the Baltimore legislators. “Ere long we shall ask them to [also] abolish the imprisonment of women who are not in debt to the priests.”²¹⁷ Images such as that in *Sister Agnes*, published in 1854, portraying nuns trapped behind a convent grate, reinforced this idea of imprisonment and thus the legal status of convents.

In the antebellum era, literature and other art forms played a powerful role in bringing about reform. Reformers used novels, plays, music, and art to persuade their fellow Americans to support abolition, temperance, and the establishment of correctional facilities among other measures. In promoting urban reform, a flurry of novels depicted

²¹⁷ Joseph G. Mannard, “‘What Has Become of Olevia Neal?’: The Escaped Nun Phenomenon in Antebellum America,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 105, no. 4 (December 2010), 350 – 358; Andrew B. Cross, *Priests’ Prisons for Women, or a Consideration of the Question, Whether Unmarried Foreign Priests Ought to Be Permitted to Erect Prisons, into which, Under Pretense of Religion, to Seduce or Entrap, or by Force Compel Young Women to Enter, and after they have Secured their Property, Keep them in Confinement, and Compel them as Slaves to Submit themselves to their will, under the Penalty of Flogging or the Dungeon?* (Baltimore: Sherwood & Co., 1854), 12-16, 23, 40-41, 11.

the squalor, debauchery, violence, crime, and personal ruin that lurked beneath the imposing structures of the city. These “city mysteries,” like convent narratives, both horrified and fascinated readers. City mystery novelists even drew on previously established plots and themes from convent literature. Like the convent, which appeared impressive from the outside, but inside entrapped vulnerable women in a nightmare of corruption, city mysteries unveiled glittering saloons and gambling halls as abodes which attracted naïve, young city-goers, until entombing them in a life of misery, vice, and destitution.²¹⁸

City mysteries, like convent narratives, enjoyed overwhelming popularity. Some of the most famous titles included George Lippard’s *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (1845), which sold 60,000 copies in its first year of publication. In 1848 well-known dime novelist Ned Buntline, an alias for Edward Zane Carroll Judson, published *The Mystery and Miseries of New York*, an intriguing exposé of city life that sold over 100,000 copies in its first year. George G. Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* (1850) quickly went through three editions practically before the ink was dry. And William M. Bobo, a South Carolinian “who had nothing else to do” other than visit the urban North, wrote another unflattering city mystery based on his travel experience, entitled *Glimpses of New York City* (1852). As David Reynolds argues in his work on nineteenth century American fiction, “it is understandable that the dark city-mysteries genre, portraying the

²¹⁸ For an overview on the city mystery genre, see Elizabeth Kelley Gray, “The World by Gaslight: Urban-gothic Literature and Moral Reform in New York City, 1845-1860,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 2 (June 2009): 137-161; David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, with a New Forward by Sean Wilentz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 82-87; for a useful overview of the role of literature in advancing antebellum reform, see Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (Apr. 1995): 303-334; see also Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

city as a modern ‘Sodom,’ ... would arise in the 1840s, for such novels reflected the profound fears and fantasies of an American population faced with rapid urbanization and industrialization.”²¹⁹

The aims and reviews of city mysteries were ambiguous. Critics branded Lippard’s *Quaker City* “the most immoral work of the age.” Yet it was also, according to the preface, the most read of “any work of American fiction ever published.” Some praised the genre for bringing real societal issues to light, while others criticized the books for being nothing more than bawdy literature. Authors of city mysteries advocated their wares as harbingers of reform, criticizing the growing economic gap between the rich and poor and highlighting the influence of poverty in relation to the rise of crime and prostitution. In *New York by Gas-Light*, George Foster defended unveiling the “real facts” so that “Philanthropy and Justice may plant their blows aright.” Buntline similarly expressed the hope that his book would lead to urban reform.²²⁰ Yet both city mysteries and convent narratives incorporated romance, adventure, Gothic horror, erotica, and extreme characters which ranged the spectrum from fiendish villains to beautiful virgins. Whether critical of economic circumstances or religious institutions, both city mysteries and convent narratives mingled calls for reform with entertainment and enjoyed wild popularity, if not for various reasons.

²¹⁹ George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1847); George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (New York: N. Orr, 1850); Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849); William M. Bobo, *Glimpses of New York City* (Charleston: J. J. McCarter, 1852); David M. Henkin, “City Streets and the Urban World of Print,” in *The History of the Book in America, Vol. III: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, eds. Scott E. Casper et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 345; for information on the popularity of Buntline’s city mysteries, see Jay Monaghan, *The Great Rascal: The Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1952), 146; Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 82.

²²⁰ Lippard, Preface, *The Quaker City*; Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 69.

The literary ambiguity of these “immoral reform writings,” as David Reynolds describes them, aligned them within the Gothic. Gothic literature, in one way or another, presented a conflict between the past and the present, civilization and savagery, reason and irrationality, progress and degeneracy. Typically Gothic works presented an “uncivilized” past in conflict with modernity, but Gothic literature also at times questioned concepts of civilization, displaying the barbarity of modern times. Presenting a counter-narrative to the celebration of progress and raising troubling questions about identity and beliefs, city mysteries dramatized the degeneracy of the urban landscape. While city lithographs, guides, and directories highlighted the splendor of the growing metropolis, city mysteries promised to remove its shimmering veneer to reveal a horrific world beneath.²²¹

Anti-Catholic literature easily lent itself to the Gothic style as Catholicism represented a symbolic past that haunted a Protestant present. Filled with references to the past, convent narratives referenced medieval customs of asceticism, torture, and ceremony. Anti-Catholic literature wrestled with questions of identity, as writers desperately asserted what it meant to be “Protestant” and “American” and contrasted those identities with a foreign religion, culture, and nationhood. In addition, Catholicism appeared opposed to the very type of sincerity and authenticity that Americans valued. Nuns and convents appeared in widely accepted Gothic literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, set in Rome, Italy, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, where

²²¹ Reynolds, 83; Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History’s Nightmares* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xvi, xx, xviii, 286, xxii; for more on urban literature, see Henkin, “City Streets and the Urban World of Print,” in *The Industrial Book*, eds. Casper et al., 331 – 346; for a helpful analysis of Gothic literature in the nineteenth century, see Patrick R. O’Malley, “Gothic,” in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. Pamela K. Gilbert (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 81 – 93.

the spectre of a nun haunts the female protagonist. The convent, symbolic of the religion on the whole, appeared impressive on the surface, in ceremony and architecture, while it rotted from within.²²²

In large part, city mysteries borrowed from well-established conventions of anti-Catholic literature, especially convent narratives. Escaped nun tales and other convent stories appeared an entire decade before publication of the first city mystery. Previous to the appearance of Lippard's *Quaker City*, Maria Monk unveiled a vice-ridden underworld where innocent women wilted in the face of debauchery. Disguised villains, a mainstay of city mysteries, appeared as early as 1832 in George Bourne's *Lorette*, which described the various disguises behind which seemingly pious priests and abbesses hid. *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery, Rosamond, and The Escape of Sainte Frances Patrick*, all of which appeared in 1836, presented a perplexing combination of virtuous calls for reform within the pages of seamy details—a grouping the city mystery authors later mastered.²²³ Before city mysteries depicted the intricate trap set by the mirage of urban glamor that entangled the young and the vulnerable in poverty and vice, convent narratives depicted the imprisonment of young women lured into convents under false

²²² For more on Catholicism and the Gothic, see Patrick R. O'Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and the Victorian Gothic Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 3; and Maria Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism: Religion, Cultural Exchange and the Popular Novel, 1785-1829* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2009), especially chapters 3-4; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (1860; New York: New American Library, 1961); Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853; New York: St. Martin Press, 1992).

²²³ George Bourne, *Lorette: The History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun* (New York: William A. Mercin, 1833); Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (New York: Howe & Bates, 1836); *Rosamond; or, A Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of an American Female Under the Popish Priests* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1836); Samuel B. Smith, ed. *The Escape of Sainte Frances Patrick, Another Nun from the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (New York: Office of the Downfall of Babylon, 1836).

pretenses. Best-selling convent exposés thus primed an American public for city mystery tales.

Both genres also fit comfortably within nativist prose, which contrasted an Edenic America with Old World corruption and urban decay. City mysteries and convent narratives presented a nostalgic view of an American past alongside scenes of impending doom and destruction. By shocking and entertaining readers, they served to promote nativist and reform politics. The literature portrayed vice itself as something foreign, associating convents and urban corruption with immigration and the Old World. As nativists' spokespersons emphasized the vulnerability of the country in the face of certain foreign dangers, convent and city mystery literature illustrated vulnerable men and women before the threat of gambling halls, brothels, and the cloister. As warning literature, city mysteries and convent narratives borrowed from and reinforced nativist calls to protect America from foreign influence and return the country to its native virtue.

Some of the worst dangers to American life assumed the appearance of goodness. Nativists and convent narrative authors frequently referred to the "cloak of religion" under which priests and nuns hid their inner malice. They excelled in "the art of hypocrisy," lulling the unassuming into accepting the Catholic faith and committing themselves in convents. "O how these Superiors are enveloped in artifice," read *The Escaped Nun*. "She thickens the surrounding darkness," it continued, "she lulls you into tranquility, she decoys you into her snares, she fascinates you." Superiors also colluded with priests, who, according to *Sister Agnes*, hid "the depth of villainy which lurked below [their] polished and dignified exterior." Jesuits, worst of all priests, as far as anti-Catholic theories went, operated as the pope's special trained secret agents. *The Escaped*

Nun summed up the gist of conspiracy theories surrounding convents, stating “everyone within the walls . . . was either a plotter, a victim, or a dupe and instrument of the intrigue of others.”²²⁴

Instructors in convent schools and Catholic domestic servants, warned such literature, also caught the unguarded by surprise. One convent narrative described a Catholic domestic servant and tutor who was actually an authentic spy-nun for Rome. *The Female Jesuit* appeared in 1851 and described the witch-like deception of the “Jesuitess.” These women pledged “obedience, absolute and unconditional, without question to the consequences.” Unlike the cloistered nun, the Jesuitess traveled “from convent to convent, [and] from country to country,” carrying out a “perfect system of espionage.” The object of this espionage was the conversion of Protestant children through which the country might come under the influence of the Pope. Like the convent narratives of the 1840s, which focused largely upon the threat faced by young girls in convent schools, *The Female Jesuit* warned Protestant parents against sending their children to convent schools—“the very heart of popery”—and against employing Catholic female domestics, who could be spies. Some of the female spies even preyed on the sympathy of kind Protestants by pretending to be escaped nuns. No one was safe against these women, “always at work, plotting and counterplotting.” If there was

²²⁴ Popular literature portrayed the Jesuit as an international spy working to extend Catholic control over the whole world; for more on the image of the Jesuit, see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 100-107; For primary sources, see D. Achilli, *Dealings with the Inquisition, or Papal Rome, her Priests and her Jesuits* (New York, 1851); Richard Baxter, *Jesuit Juggling, Forty Popish Frauds Detected and Disclosed* (New York, 1834); Bunkley, *The Escaped Nun*, 25, 24; Clergyman’s Widow, *Sister Agnes; or, The Captive Nun* (New York: Riker, Thorne & Co., 1854), 342; Bunkley, 248.

anything worse or more dangerous than a Jesuit, the author declared, “it was a Jesuitess.”²²⁵

The “Jesuitess” also appeared in *Sister Agnes*, a convent narrative published in 1854. In this novel, the heroine of the story came under the tutelage of a French Catholic governess. The governess, or Jesuit spy, worked to “win the affection and trust of the little girl.” One household at a time, she carried out the plans of popery, which included “a subjugated world” and the downfall of American freedoms. Under the care of the governess, the poor girl “became a devout papist before she was even aware.” The rest of the story chronicled her ill-fated future in a convent, which saw her starved, lonely, and tortured. In *The Convent and the Manse*, published a year earlier, a Protestant girl sent to a convent school expressed how little Protestant families knew of “how their affairs are laid open before these priests and nuns, and how one domestic is instructed to watch and report any such breach of Catholic duty as attending Protestant church, or family prayer in her fellow domestics!”²²⁶ In other words, Catholic servants not only spied on the families for which they worked, but also “corrupted” the minds of Protestant children under their ward, all under the guise of service and care.

Things were never as they appeared in convent narratives. Seemingly respectable priests harbored harems, mother superiors were anything but maternal, ruling with brute force, and the nun, who told the world she was contented in her chosen vocation, lived as a captive slave. Benjamin Barker, author of *Cecilia, or, The White Nun of the Wilderness* (1845), stated that the character of Friar Anselmo “was merely designed to illustrate how

²²⁵ Jemima Luke, *The Female Jesuit; or, The Spy in the Family* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1851), 18-19, 47, 352.

²²⁶ Widow, *Sister Agnes*, 26, 35 – 36, 43, 67; Jane Chaplin Dunbar, *The Convent and the Manse* (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1853), 78.

the deepest and most detestable villains may be covered by the assumed cloak of religious sanctity.” The reference to the robe of the priest, the mask of the Jesuit, the dress and veil of the nun, all carried with them an understanding of costume, a covering of one’s true identity. Reflecting this fear of a disguised foe and implying “Romanism,” Thomas Whitney, in an address before the Order of United Americans—a precursor to the Know Nothing Party—declared, “We behold a treacherous enemy lurking in our midst, under the mantle of feigned sanctity.” If not detected and rooted out, such enemies could destroy the “independent, prosperous, powerful, and happy” character of the country.²²⁷

The fear of deception, often represented by veils and masks, appeared in city mysteries as well. Reflecting Victorian concerns with the dangers of hypocrisy in growing urban settings, city mysteries included two stock characters: the Confidence Man and the Painted Woman. These two characters embodied the art of hypocrisy, evidenced by their ability to “manipulate facial expressions, manner, and personal appearance” in order to lure the naïve into their confidences. Painted women—prostitutes who posed as respectable ladies—easily enticed the naïve male city-goer. While he would have otherwise avoided conversation with a prostitute, he willingly gave his attention to the painted lady who only at the opportune time revealed her true identity. *New York by Gas-Light* exposed readers to women who “pass[ed] for virtuous and

²²⁷ Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 8; Susan M. Griffin, “The Yellow Mask, the Black Robe, and the Woman in White: Wilkie Collins, Anti-Catholic Discourse, and the Sensational Novel,” *NARRATIVE* 12, no. 1 (January 2004), 58; Benjamin Barker, *Cecilia, or, the White Nun of the Wilderness, a Romance of Love and Intrigue* (Boston: United States Publishing Co., 1845), Introduction; Thomas R. Whitney, *An Address Delivered by Thomas R. Whitney, Esq., December 22, 1851, at Hope Chapel, New-York City, On the Occasion of the Seventh Anniversary of Alpha Chapter, Order of United Americans* (New York: John A. Gray, 1852), Order of the United Americans Records, New York Public Library.

respectable wives, mothers, and daughters,” while their true “licentiousness had not yet been discovered.”²²⁸

The Confidence Man first appeared in Buntline’s *The G’hals of New York New* (1850). He displayed the outward signs of Christian virtue in order to win the confidence of unsuspecting strangers for subversive purposes. While a uniquely American ironic character, the confidence man also grew out of portrayals of the Jesuit, who served as an archetype for the modern confidence man. The con man, as he became known, could also just be someone who presented one image by day and another by night, such as the city’s well-to-do businessmen, lawyers, and ministers who appeared in city mysteries as swindlers and drunks who frequented prostitutes and gambling halls. In city mysteries things were not as they seemed; those who appeared trustworthy harbored ill intentions; those who seemed to be model Christian gentleman patronized gambling halls and brothels; and the shimmering city really covered over growing decay. Hidden under his “gentlemanly dress,” wrote Ned Buntline of his book’s villain, existed a character “black, vile, and devilish.” In Lippard’s *Quaker City*, likewise, just about every character donned a cloak of deception, and all of city life was a realm of “deceits and confidences.”²²⁹

Young men, new to the city, most often played the role of the victim to the deceptions of conmen and painted women in city mysteries, while young women fell prey to convents, lured by the supposed sanctity of monastic life. In the city, “many a young man is ruined,” explained *Glimpses of New York*. The young man of the city mysteries

²²⁸ Charles L. Crow, *American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 59; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830 – 1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xiv; Foster, 72.

²²⁹ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 92; Lippard, *Quaker City*, 25; an excellent on the use and meaning of social counterfeits in Victorian culture is Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

began innocent, naïve, vulnerable, and full of promise. After being enticed by the glittering surfaces of the gambling halls or saloons, he found himself trapped, addicted to alcohol, gambling, and women. He then got into debt over his head and spent his energy and his youth fighting or whoring in a drunken state. After losing his innocence and what little money he had, and being severed from his former familial and friendly ties, he was ruined, a pitiful captive of the city.²³⁰

The story ran along a strikingly similar trajectory in convent narratives. At first the illusion of peace, happiness, and piety apart from the outside world drew young women into the convent. The abbess and other nuns initially treated her with the “most winning kindness.” Yet after the young woman made her vows, she became a cloistered captive, enclosed behind heavy, locked doors, behind which ensued her moral ruin. Life in the convent, she soon learned, was not peaceful, but toilsome, gloomy instead of happy, and corrupt instead of pious. After being subjected to sexual debauchery and unusual torture, she emerged a fallen woman, a lost cause, cut off from the eventual promise of a loving husband, children, and self and societal respect.²³¹

According to nativists, all of America was falling prey to the deceptions of a dangerous foe. Members of nativist organizations worked to arouse Americans from their slumber to enemy infiltrations. “The greatest battle between true democracy and despotism,” explained a nativist gift book, raged in America. The enemy, unable to destroy democracy with arms, resorted instead to “duplicity.” Owing to “at least an appearance of decency,” explained prominent nativist John Dowling, Americans have allowed convents to be established on their soil. But under their “veil of concealment,”

²³⁰ Bobo, *Glimpses of New York City*, 31.

²³¹ *The Nunnery; or, Popery Exposed in Her Tyranny* (London: James Miller, 1854), 4.

they were all “dark prison houses...of slavery, misery, corruption, and despair.”²³²

Convent narratives and urban mysteries vividly displayed the varied masks of respectability and gentility worn by the most pernicious of villains. They offered further credence to Know Nothing arguments by the 1850s that the source of the nation’s problems—be they poverty, crime, or irreligion—lay with some of the most unsuspecting agents. The ruin that befell individual men and women in city and convent narratives, symbolized the potential hazards faced by the nation if certain cancers were not rooted out.

Unlike in earlier decades, however, convent opponents resisted any call to arms. They did not promote storming convents or any violent measure, as their co-patriots did when they raided and burned Mount Benedict to the ground in 1834. Instead they urged dealing with convents through legal means, reflecting distaste for vigilante violence and the extension of convent suspicion into mainstream and genteel culture. Much of the convent literature produced in the 1850s specifically denounced mob violence against nuns and nunneries. Hannah Corcoran’s narrative—based on her alleged abduction by priests—juxtaposed rash, mob reaction on the streets to her “abduction” with the calm Christian reaction inside a Baptist church. “Within [the church], men were praying;...without, they were cursing and exciting each other to violence. Within, they were singing the songs of Zion; without, the song of the drunkard... Within was holy calm; without, a wild tumult.” Her protectors endeavored to use “every lawful means and quiet effort to secure, if possible, the restoration of Hannah Corcoran to her liberty” and

²³² Hon. Anson Burlingame, “Priestcraft,” in *Our Country; or, The American Parlor Keepsake* (Boston: J. M. Usher, 1854), 79; Dowling, *The History of Romanism*, 812.

to “do nothing in this matter to create or promote excitement.” Violence, immoral and ineffective, was thus the wrong response to “Catholic injustices.”²³³

If convents posed a threat to respectable, normative family values, as all convent narratives alleged, then the response to convents could not be one of violence. Convent narratives compared the “purity of character [and] the sincerity of affection...which are to be found in family circles,” with the “false, hypocritical, hard-headed and cruel tyrants who rule those misnamed abodes of religion—convents!” *Popery Exposed*, described the ways in which priests instigated family strife, earning the confidences of a wife in candid conversations in the confessional only to estrange her from her husband. A typical scene in convent narratives featured the harrowing experience of a young woman leaving the safe, loving, and nurturing home of her youth to go off into a wilderness of danger and malice within the cloister. *The Convent and the Manse*, a story of two sisters, depicted one sister’s life in a gloomy convent school and the other’s at her home at Brookside Manse. The one location was gloomy, lonely, and solemn, the other cheerful, bright, and full of warm companionship. The convent was not only a wretched place in comparison to the home, it was also unsafe, a place beyond the protection of father, husband, and the law.²³⁴

City mysteries also contrasted a violent, harsh world with a nurturing, safe home. In *New York by Gas-Light*, George Foster presented the sorry scene of men who forfeited the warm homes of their families for “cold, narrow, grave-like bedrooms in private boarding houses where they received ‘the comforts of home’ for five dollars a week.”

²³³ Thomas Ford Caldicott, *Hannah Corcoran: An Authentic Narrative of Her Conversion from Romanism, Her Abduction from Charlestown, and the Treatment She Received During Her Absence* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1853), 84, 65.

²³⁴ Bunkley, 120; *Popery Exposed; or, The Secrets and Privacy of the Confessional Unmasked* (New York: William R. Taylor, c. 1840); Dunbar, *Convent and the Manse*.

Violence especially characterized harsh city slums and streets. An image entitled “A New York Street Scene” in *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York* (1854) depicted a man on the ground, his top hat and cane tossed from his person, as two other men accost him, one with a club, the other with a poised knife. City mysteries detailed the sordid conditions of decaying homes in hovels and shanties in New York’s Bowery and Five Points districts.²³⁵ Violence, poverty, gloom, and estrangement thus permeated urban centers, far removed from the safety and loving nurture of the home. The antidote to city corruption, thus, could not be violence but reform—voluntary and lawful. Just as convent narratives presented convents as lonely prisons for women, so too did city mysteries depict urban centers as dungeons of debauchery, in contrast to domesticity and civility.

By the 1850s the elevation of the home and family life manifested itself in a thoroughly domestic religion. As growing urbanization and industrialization in the antebellum era made society more chaotic, impersonal, and alienating, the home came to symbolize all that was peaceful, unchanging, and secure. By extension, the home and family became increasingly associated with women and religion. Reverend Thomas More wrote in 1856 that “there were two institutions that have come down from Eden”: the Protestant Sabbath and the family. In opposition to a celibate life, Andrew Cross upheld marriage as “the most enduring source of peace and joy to mankind,” and family as entailing “the tenderest [sic] emotions...which endear man to man.” Horace Bushnell, well-known Congregational minister and theologian, argued that true religion “never thoroughly penetrates life, till it becomes domestic.” Domesticity thus came to serve a vital role in efforts to create a Christian nation, becoming the private side of the

²³⁵ Foster, 10; Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (New York: De Witt and Davenport, 1854), 336; see also Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*.

“Righteous Empire,” the impetus behind much reform, including efforts to uphold a woman’s place in the home, investigate or ban convents, and clean up city haunts.²³⁶

The American Party adroitly combined domestic, religious, and nationalistic arguments against convents. To defend the country’s women and families, the party promised to “ask for such legislation that none may be imprisoned in a convent against her will, and that parents have a right to explore those dens into which their offspring have been enticed.” A nativist gift book contended that countries which housed convents had “all been cursed by [their] presence.” Andrew Cross castigated convents as “entirely anti-American” and stated that “the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of Independence, and the spirit of the people of the United States, are all against such institutions.” In a “shrewd,” “energetic,” and forward-looking country, as one nativist book described America, convents as “impractical,” “unnecessary,” and subversive, deserved no place. A popular convent narrative of the era expressed succinctly the national and domestic argument against convents, “Are convents so essential to the constitution of the state? What need has the bridegroom for some many foolish virgins?”²³⁷ The state and the bridegroom—literal and religious—had no need for virgins, only devoted wives and mothers.

²³⁶ Thomas More, “God’s University, or; The Family Considered as a Government, a School and a Church,” *Home, School and Church: The Presbyterian Repository* 6 (1856), 8; Cross, *Priests’ Prisons for Women*, 25; Horace Bushnell, *Discourses on Christian Nurture* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1847), 71; for more on domestic religion, see Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

²³⁷ Frederick Rinehart Anspach, *The Sons of the Sires; A History of the Rise, Progress, and Destiny of the American Party, And Its Probable Influence on the Next Election* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1855), 30, 200; Cross, *Priests’ Prisons*, inside advertisement, 40; *A Voice to America; or, the Model Republic, Its Glory, or Its Fall: With a Review of the Causes of the Decline and Failure of the Republics of South America, Mexico, and of the Old World; Applied to the Present Crisis in the United States* (New York: Edward Walker, 1855), 299-300; Bunkley, 152.

Nativists coupled their avowed defense of the home, women, and the nation—often interchangeable aspects of society in nativist rhetoric—with warnings against foreign influence. In *Enemies of America Unmasked* J. Wayne Laurens argued “Foreign influences are making this country a receptacle for the hopelessly bad and disaffected population of Europe.” The very mingling of “ignorant and depraved foreigners” with Americans, attested another nativist writer, “diminishes the purity and intelligence and piety we had before.”²³⁸ City mysteries and convent narratives often drew on allusions to the foreign, reinforcing nativists’ attacks against all things un-American. Foreign foes appeared in the form of the Old World convent, the immigrant, and exotic cultures. Both genres made frequent foreign allusions to illustrate the allure and danger of convent or city life and to cast corruption as something alien to America.

City mystery authors alluded to the “Orient” and the Middle East—decidedly non-white and non-Christian places—in depicting the decadence and debauchery of city life. *Glimpses of New York* compared the city residents’ “worship” of the “silver dollar” with “idolatry equaled only by a faithful follower of Mahomet.” George Foster likened a city saloon to “Aladdin’s cave,” and prostitutes to “Pariahs.” To ridicule the growing social inequality within American urban centers, writers, beginning with Oliver Wendell Holmes, began to speak of “Brahmins” in reference to Boston’s upper classes. Of his villain character in *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, Buntline wrote, “His eyes [are]

²³⁸ J. Wayne Laurens, *The Crisis, or the Enemies of America Unmasked* (Philadelphia: G. D. Miller, 1855), 44-5; Alfred B. Ely, *American Liberty, Its Sources,--Its Dangers, and the Means of its Preservation; an Oration, Delivered at the Broadway Tabernacle, in New-York, Before the Order of United Americans, on the 22nd of February, A. D. 1850, Being the 118th Anniversary of the Birthday of Washington* (New York: B’s Seaman & Dunham, 1850), 20-1, Order of the United Americans Records, New York Public Library.

lustful far more than Tarquin...his soul darker than Iago's."²³⁹ These foreign allusions served to distance American values of morality, homespun virtue, and democracy from the growing presence of vice, luxury, and social divisions appearing in the nation's growing cities.

City mystery authors also employed foreign imagery to paint city haunts as enticingly dangerous. Wall Street, for George Foster, was like "the valley of riches told of by Sindbad, where millions of diamonds lay glistening like fiery snow, but which was guarded on all sides by poisonous serpents." "This is surely Aladdin's cave that we have stumbled into," wrote Foster of Gotham's oyster cellars. "On either hand stretches away...in a gorgeous labyrinth of many-colored glass, damask curtains and shaded lights, a long row of mirrored arcades." George Lippard described a mighty "Caliph at a masquerade ball." Brothels, likewise, for many of the city mysteries authors, were likened to an Islamic paradise.²⁴⁰ These glittering, exotic surfaces enticed city residents who answered the siren calls to their doom.

From their first appearance, convent narratives associated convent life with the foreign. Whether situated in Canada, Spain, France, or Italy, convents represented a relic of a distant time and place. Implicitly, the priest of convent narratives resembled the "Turk" of city mysteries, known for his lack of self-control, religion, and whiteness. The tale of *Rosamond* (1836), set in Cuba, revealed the horrifying misadventures of a priest's mistress, with the most sordid anecdotes written in Latin or Spanish to emphasize their

²³⁹ Bobo, 11; Foster, *New York in Slices: By An Experienced Carver: Being the Original Slices Published in the New York Tribune* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1848), 94, 16; Gray, "The World by Gas-Light," 147; Buntline, 92.

²⁴⁰ Foster, *New York in Slices*, 16, 18, 93 – 95; Lippard, *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (Cincinnati: H. M. Rulison, 1853), 155.

obscurity. The tale described the priest's insatiable lusts and his part in a clerical plot to kill Cuban boys and grind them up into sausages. Some authors also referenced the Middle East, India, Islam, or Hinduism. A mother in *The Nun of St. Ursula* (1845) compared her daughter's decision to become a nun with converting to Islam, but reflected that the latter would be preferable as Islam recognized Christ as a prophet, while the convent offered a life "apart from the living yet not with the dead." *Awful Disclosures'* description of "Nuns' Island," which stored the young and most beautiful nuns for the priests to visit for "criminal purposes," sounded strikingly similar to descriptions of Aladdin's cave or some Islamic paradise. One article even described a convent in "the desert of Sinai." In anti-Catholic literature, Roman Catholicism appeared as a foreign infiltration of the Old World which threatened national unity, values, and religion.²⁴¹

Perhaps no other author capitalized on the drama of foreign allusions more than Harry Hazel. A popular author of both city mysteries and convent narratives, Hazel wrote *The Nun of St. Ursula, or, The Burning of the Convent: A Romance of Mount Benedict* (1845), *The Burglars, or, the Mysteries of the League of Honor, the Belle of Boston* (1844), *Jack Wade, the Cobbler of Gotham* (1856), and most famously, *Sweeny Todd, or, The Ruffian Barber: A Tale of the Terrors of the Sea and the Mysteries of the City* (1865), among other works. Hazel's fictional account of the real burning of the Charlestown convent appeared among a number of similar stories. Two decades after the burning of

²⁴¹ Gray describes how the "Turk" represented a man who lacked self-control in nineteenth century fiction in "The World by Gas-Light," 153; Smith, *Rosamond; or, A Narrative of the Captivity and Suffering of an American Female under the Popish Priests, in the Island of Cuba, with a full Disclosure of their Manners and Customs*, 188-189; Harry Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula, or, The Burning of the Convent: A Romance of Mount Benedict* (Boston: Gleason, 1845), 55; Maria Monk, *Further Disclosures by Maria Monk, Concerning the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal, Also Her Visit to Nun's Island and Disclosures Concerning that Secret Retreat* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1837) ; "The Convent in the Desert," *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (Feb. 1857); Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 1, 4.

Mount Benedict in 1834—one of the worst acts of nativist violence before the Civil War—anti-Catholics took to mythologizing and commemorating the event as a victory over Romanism. Justifying his foray into the genre of convent narratives, Hazel merely stated that the mystery surrounding the burning of the Ursuline Convent made it a “good theme for the writer of fiction.” Although an imaginative work, Hazel noted that the story “may stumble upon some stubborn truths.”²⁴²

In his rendition of the story, a strapping Yankee, Jack Melville, instigates the burning. Recently returned from an overseas trip, Jack sets out to avenge his lovely young sister trapped within the confines of the convent. Jack had been shipwrecked and washed ashore in Turkey, among “strange looking men with jewelry and long beards.” While there, the Ottoman Navy enlists him before he leads them to victory against Greece. After being awarded by the sultan for his victory with “lots of gold,” Jack falls in love with Zillah, a Turkish princess who is soon thereafter taken away by a Spanish captain. Jack then receives a letter from his mother informing him of his sister’s entrance at Mount Benedict, leading him to ponder two objectives: to free his sister from the “living grave” of the convent back home and rescue his lover from “Spanish slavery.” With the aid of an entire Turkish fleet, he accomplishes both in spectacular fashion. Although the Turkish foreigner in this instance was more friend than foe, the allusions to the foreign only reinforced the view of the Catholic as “other” and also rendered the story of the burning of the Ursuline convent more dramatic and exciting.²⁴³

²⁴² Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula, or, The Burning of the Convent*; other convent narratives based on the burning of the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, include: Frothingham, *The Convent’s Doom: A Tale of Charlestown in 1834: Also the Haunted Convent*; and Frothingham, *Six Hours in a Convent; or, The Stolen Nuns! A Tale of Charlestown in 1834* 8th ed. (Boston: Graves & Weston, 1855).

²⁴³ Hazel, *The Nun of St. Ursula*.

In contrast to those who reveled in foreign decadence, city mysteries featured humble working-class heroes. Sewing girls and country boys new to city life stood far removed from fashionable ladies and luxurious aristocrats. Ned Buntline, whose famous city mysteries sold for twenty-five cents and thus appealed to the working class, claimed to have hated “gentlemen” and to have fought duels in the navy to assert himself against aristocrats. Buntline originally set out to write “lasting literature,” but finding it difficult to compete in the literary marketplace with this approach, turned to writing cheap fiction. He noticed in New York that crowds of poorly dressed working class people bought cheaply printed books that fit easily into a coat pocket. Like Lippard, Buntline, according to his biographer, found “it popular to praise the poor and ridicule the rich.”²⁴⁴ Although convent narratives spoke to economic issues decidedly less than city mysteries, their Protestant male heroes also appeared more humble, hard-working, and honest than the narratives’ indulgent and decadent priests.

By having unfamiliar faces, names, and backgrounds, sinister characters were easier to despise. Priests easily played the role of the monster murderer in popular fiction, their unmarried state and strange garb setting them apart from average, familiar men. In *Cecilia*, Friar Anselmo, a “capital plotter” and “mad imp of the devil,” worked to satiate his lustful desires with the story’s heroine by attempting to kill off her lover. Coming to the rescue, “the white nun of the wilderness”—a nun who escaped into the woods outside the convent who was all too familiar with cunning priests—landed a rapier into the Friar’s heart as she screamed, “seducer, monster, hypocrite...die!” In other narratives, priests laughed while they brutally tortured or murdered innocent nuns; they relished the

²⁴⁴ Monaghan, *The Great Rascal*, 123-124.

destruction of family relations and fortunes like insatiable animals; and when they themselves experienced retribution, readers felt relief.²⁴⁵ Because convent narratives made such use of melodramatic descriptions of priests as villains, it was easy for readers and the public to be more sympathetic to nativist cries to block immigration, bar Catholics from public office, and investigate convents.

Portrayals of depraved villains in city mysteries and convent narratives reflected changing cultural constructions of crime and the criminal. In the eighteenth century, execution sermons said before the death of a convicted criminal focused mostly on the state of the convict's soul, the series of smaller sins that led to the horrible charge, and the way in which the convicted stood as an example of human depravity in all people. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, secular accounts—biographies, murder trials, and journalistic narratives—replaced the execution sermon. Rather than focusing on the state of the criminal's soul, these accounts centered on the dramatic nature of the violence itself. Sensational fiction, which elicited strong emotions for their own sake, and Gothic horror, which employed graphic treatments of violence to stir feelings of dread, hatred, and mystery served to further de-familiarize the criminal from society. The Gothic narrative of murder transformed the image of the criminal from a common sinner into a moral monster from whom readers shrunk back with a sense of dread and disbelief. City mysteries and convent narratives reinforced this view of criminality, projecting it onto urban philanderers, conmen, drunkards, priests, and mother superiors.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Barker, *Cecilia*, 27, 56.

²⁴⁶ For a thorough discussion of the transition from the execution sermon to the secular criminal accounts and its significance, see Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674 – 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*

The growing sense of unfamiliarity and the prospect of secret vice rendered urban centers frightening to the early nineteenth century American public. City mysteries unveiled a secret world which otherwise went unseen by the common person. They led readers out into the darkest night and took them behind closed doors, past guards, through underground tunnels, into hidden bed chambers, and beyond the mask of civility worn by respectable city figures. *Glimpses of New York* invited readers to move “behind the curtains [of the city, where] all the mystery vanishes like a fog.” George Foster promised that *New York by Gas-Light* would “penetrate beneath the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis.” Such an unveiling revealed “festivities of prostitution, orgies of pauperism, . . . theft, murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauchery,” in short, “an underground story of life in New York.”²⁴⁷ City mystery titles themselves invited readers to peer into the secret recesses of vice, such as *New York Naked* (1854) and *The Secrets of the Twin Cities, or, The Great Metropolis Unmasked* (1849).

The idea of peering into something hidden or forbidden had long contributed to the success of convent narratives. Maria Monk enticed readers with her privy information as an insider who had “access to every part of the [convent], even to the cellar, where two sisters were imprisoned . . .” Convent narratives presented a privileged glimpse into a secret world, with titles such as *The Nunnery, or, Popery Exposed* (1854), *Open Convents* (1836), and *Popery Exposed; or, The Secrecy and Privacy of the Confessional Unmasked* (1845). Josephine Bunkley’s best-selling convent narrative of the 1850s vowed to reveal

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), chapters 1-4; and Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain.”

²⁴⁷ Bobo, 10; Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, Introduction.

“a more minute detail of [the nun’s] inner life and a bolder revelation of the mysteries and secrets of nunneries than have ever been before submitted to the American public.” The author of *Sister Agnes* set out to “lift the golden veil” to reveal the “deformities” of the “state of seclusion.”²⁴⁸ This privileged glimpse, as it were, enticed readers as much as it horrified them.

“Monk Hall” of George Lippard’s *Quaker City*—so titled because of Philadelphia’s Quaker heritage—more specifically mirrored the convent of nun literature. Situated in the center of the city in Lippard’s novel, Monk Hall served as brothel, gambling hall, and opium den. Here men from among the city’s elite and criminal gangs gathered to engage in all forms of vice. A multi-storied building, complete with subterranean passages, ensured the men’s privacy who met in secret. The hall consisted of multiple layers, each moving in toward greater depravity. The outer rooms consisted of dancing halls, while private rooms further in housed select parties who engaged in secret activities. Indeed Monk Hall included of a myriad of “private” facets: a “private staircase,” “private rooms,” “private conversations,” and a “private history.”²⁴⁹ A “hole” existed in the center of the Hall, where heaps of rags covered a haggard woman lying with her destitute children, along with others, “blacks and whites...with hardly any clothes.”

Like Monk Hall, and Dante’s *Inferno* for that matter, the convent represented the epitome of Catholic decay, and its inner layers each advanced in depravity. In *The*

²⁴⁸ Monk, *Awful Disclosures*, 24; *The Nunnery, or, Popery Exposed*; Theodore Dwight, *Open Convents, or, Nunneries and Popish Seminaries dangerous to the morals and degrading to the character of a republican community* (New York: Van Nostrand and Dwight, 1836); *Popery Exposed; or, the Secrecy and Privacy of the Confessional*, Archives of the University of Notre Dame; Bunkley, *The Escaped Nun; Widow, Sister Agnes*, 2.

²⁴⁹ Lippard, *Quaker City*, 207, 9, 84; for a helpful analysis of the Gothic aspects of Monk Hall, see Crow, *American Gothic*, 28-29.

Nunnery the convent stood with its “horrid towers” and “dungeons and cages of despair.” *Awful Disclosures* led readers through the labyrinthine building, complete with secret passageways, trap doors, underground chambers, and subterranean passages. In the interior of the convent, one room opened up to “an old nun preparing various medicines,” and another allowed readers to peer at “a priest [who] waited to baptize the infants previous to their murder.” These “chambers of imagery” and mystery allowed convent inmates to enact wicked schemes out of the public eye. “I hardly know where else to find anything like the representation of the interior of a convent,” explained the protagonist of *The Nun* (1834).²⁵⁰ In each genre, the building itself, from the gambling hall to the convent, from Monk Hall to Maria Monk’s Hotel Dieu, was its own character, representing vice and sinister corruption.

The supposed secrecy of convents and city haunts, inspired nativists to embrace what their critics termed “dark lantern politics.” Members of the Order of United Americans established secret passwords, handshakes, and signs to identify themselves. They convened in secret and made decisions, political and otherwise, which they dared not publicize. “We have indeed signs and tokens known only to the initiated,” read the minutes from one OUA meeting. Through these signs, members proved themselves worthy “to the particular immunities and privileges of the Order.” Such signs, in other words, distinguished these men as members of a specific group, as “true Americans” separate from the hordes of “frauds.” “We know our true brothers by passwords, signs, bywords, and certificates,” explained the OUA pamphlet further. “He that would come into our counsels...must undergo the prescribed discipline, perform the prescribed rites,

²⁵⁰ Buntline, *Mysteries and Miseries*, 83; *The Nunnery*, Introduction; Monk, 40; Samuel D. Miller, “The Dangers of Education in Roman Catholic Seminaries,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 4, no. 5 (May 1838); Mary Sherwood, *The Nun* (Princeton: M. Baker, 1834), 1.

and pass through the prescribed mysteries...²⁵¹ Thus in an effort to expose the mysteries of cities and convents, nativists themselves went underground. They emulated the image of that which they opposed, adding to the alleged mystery and secrecy lurking beneath the surface in the country everywhere.

Gothic horror often climaxed with the decent or murder—often sexual in nature—of the story’s beautiful heroine. City mysteries prominently described the decline of attractive young females into “fallen women,” or prostitutes. Convent narratives contrasted the gruesome torture or murder of women with their impeccable beauty, or emphasized the good looks of women as further reason for their escape. Before the heroine of *The Beautiful Nun* endured gut-wrenching torture, Buntline described her as “not a bud of beauty, but full blown...tall and slender in waist with a magnificent bust.” The leading woman in *The Nun of St. Ursula* was “tall and gracefully formed with a handsome countenance.” Other narratives described the woman’s youthful glow, her perfect tendrils of hair, heaving bosom, long eyelashes, and elegant neck. The heroine of *Sister Agnes* was lovely, in the bloom of youth, before being “torn from limb to limb,” gagged, and burned with “red hot coals.”²⁵² The defilement, torture, and death of lovely women provided the reader with a sense of horror and fascination. Her escape brought about a sigh of relief at purity and beauty saved and not wasted.

²⁵¹ For a helpful description of what constituted “dark lantern politics” of the Know Nothings, see John Mulkern, “Dark Lantern Politics and the Know Nothing Triumph,” in *The Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, Mulkern, 61-86; Ely, *American Liberty, Its Sources,--Its Dangers, and the Means of its Preservation*, Order of the United Americans Records, New York Public Library.

²⁵² Hazel, 9; Ned Buntline, *The Beautiful Nun* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1866), 20; see also L. Larned, *The American Nun; or, The Effects of Romance* (Boston: Otis, Broaders, 1836); Widow, *Sister Agnes*, 404; for an analysis of this literary phenomenon, see Daniel A. Cohen, “The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850,” *Journal of Social History* 31 (1997-1998): 277-306, and Patricia Cline Cohen, “The Mystery of Helen Jewett: Romantic Fiction and the Eroticization of Violence,” *Legal Studies Forum* 17:2 (1993), 133-145.

Such depictions readied Americans for the Know Nothing appeal to protect women from convents, the youth from the city, and country from foreign influence and moral decline. Well-known nativist spokesperson and author, John Dowling argued that such places as convents, which made “men’s hearts sick,” were not “suitable abodes for the daughters and sisters of American freedom.” Another Know-Nothing text blamed Catholics and foreigners for “turn[ing] this land into a brothel and Pandemonium.” Such accusations along with repeated tales in city mysteries and convent narratives united the “dangers” of Catholicism, urban vice, immigrants, and convents, allowing these perceived threats to become interchangeable. When nativists warned against foreigners, this brought to mind images of both urban squalor and Catholics, while references to brothels and dens and vice could easily stand for nunneries.²⁵³

The larger questions of identity that were at the heart of city mysteries and convent narratives were also the impetus behind the nativist movement. The louder nativists asserted what it meant to be a real American, the more they revealed the vulnerability among the nation’s citizens as to that very question. Record number of immigrants, changing religious demographics, economic issues, urbanization, and the growth of political partisanship all threw into question the nature of the United States and her inhabitants. What kind of country would America become as it came of age? And how did these changes challenge the status quo of power, family relations, and citizenship? In a real sense the vulnerable man or woman who fell prey to city or convent deceptions symbolized the nativist fear of what could happen to the nation if certain issues were ignored.

²⁵³ Dowling, *The History of Romanism*, 812; Anspach, *Sons of the Sires*, 104.

Months before the political takeover by the American Party, Charles Frothingham published two convent narratives that wedded Know Nothingism with the campaign against convents. *The Convent's Doom*, dedicated to the "K.N. Fraternity," told of a woman imprisoned in a convent before being liberated by a "secret society" symbolic of the Know Nothings. With "no laws to help them," the fraternal group raided and burned the "female prison," meant to resemble Mount Benedict, "and [helped] the inmates escape." Patriotic responsibilities legitimized the convent's destruction in this narrative, as one brave arsonist explained, "Do you suppose our fathers fought...to give their country to priestcraft and nunneries?" By casting convents as places beyond the law that threatened female virtue and the nation, Frothingham melded political, domestic, and religious arguments against convents and advanced the Know Nothing campaign.²⁵⁴

Convent narratives, like Frothingham's, and city mysteries both presented a dystopian American future, leading the way for the Know Nothing rise. The sudden political triumph by the Know Nothing astonished the nation. "There has been," wrote Charles Francis Adams, son of John Quincy Adams, after the Massachusetts state elections in 1854, "no revolution so complete since the organization of the government." Running mostly political unknowns, the American party nevertheless placed its candidates into almost every elective position in the Commonwealth. For the most part, those who joined the ranks of the Know Nothing party and especially those who led the organization were former right-wing Whigs who felt the party had not taken a strong enough stance against the Irish Catholic question and issues of reform. At the same time, there was an aspect of the new secret party that attracted Democrats as the Know

²⁵⁴ Frothingham, *The Convent's Doom*.

Nothings sought to return politics to its populist grassroots, giving ordinary and simple people more control in the policies that ruled their lives.²⁵⁵

It was not only in Massachusetts that the Know Nothings emerged as a formidable political force, seriously damaging the established parties, especially the Whigs. Before the state elections in Massachusetts, Know Nothings won a stunning victory in June of 1854 in the Philadelphia municipal elections. That year they also stole the political scene in other parts of New England, New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Indiana, and several other western states, each locale noted for its large Catholic population. The party took hold in every northern state by the end of the year in 1854 and by 1855 had even moved to the South, winning elections in Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas.²⁵⁶

Some expressed foreboding at the American party's sweep into politics, such as William Lloyd Garrison who blasted the party for "burrowing in secret like a mole in the dark" and focusing entirely on one's place of birth and religious faith. Others stood joyfully amazed at the American party's ascent. William Brownlow, a fervent evangelical and editor of the *Knoxville Whig*, exclaimed "the hand of God...is visible in this thing. Divine Providence has raised up this new Order to purify the land and to perpetuate the civil and religious liberties." A millennialist in Indiana even saw the Know Nothing rise as a sign of humanity's entry into the "latter days."²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Charles Francis Adams, *Diary*, November 14, 1854, Microfilms of the Adams Papers; Mulkern, *The Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, 4, 65.

²⁵⁶ For more information on the Know Nothing party in the South, see Overdyke, *The Know-Nothing Party in the South*; and Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 218-219.

²⁵⁷ W. L. Garrison, "Triumph of 'Know-Nothingism,'" *Liberator* 24, no. 46 (Nov. 17, 1854), 182; *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* 6, no. 2 (Oct. 7, 1854); E.R. Ames to M. Simpson, 24 June 1854, M. Matthew Simpson Papers, Library of Congress, cited in Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, 219.

The growth of the Know Nothings both helped to topple the two-party system and took advantage of the way in which this system was already faltering on the eve of the Civil War. Various factions within the Whig party divided over the issues of slavery, immigration, and the scope of government. The party never recovered from its crushing presidential defeat of 1852, when its candidate, Winfield Scott isolated “Conscious” or anti-slavery Whigs, who detested Scott’s endorsement of the Compromise of 1850 with its provisions on slavery. In the wake of Whig disintegration, conservative Whigs (“Silver Grays”) overwhelmingly sought refuge in the new American party. At the same time, reform-bent Protestants grew increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which both Whigs and Democrats pandered to the immigrant vote. And many simply feared the immigrant threat more than the slave power. As neither Democrats nor Whigs could satisfy a coalition large enough to win elections, the two-party system fell apart.²⁵⁸

Amidst growing sectional strife and party confusion, the American party offered unity. In the divisive aftermath of the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas and Nebraska bill, the third party appeared to be a solution for rising sectionalism. Yet third parties could be just as confusing. The nativist party, under the all-encompassing title, “American,” appealed to voters who stood bewildered at the variety of sectional parties that cropped up with names such as, Temperance, Anti-Nebraska, Hard and Soft Shell (conservative and less so, respectively) Democrats, Free Soil, and Republican. In 1854, an OUA spokesperson bemoaned the growing “party spirit,” against which “Washington earnestly cautioned his countrymen.” The Know Nothings rallied all “true Americans” behind the banner of patriotism, something broad enough to encompass a plethora of

²⁵⁸ Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 112-113; Carwardine, 210-214, 199.

interests and to appear to offer security, stability, and unity in a country growing increasingly divided.²⁵⁹

The American party also presented an apparent solution to issues of modernization, such as the declining status of labor, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the oppressive factory system, and urban decay, graphically depicted in city mysteries. Neither of the two parties seemed to offer viable solutions to the issues that plagued laboring Americans in the wake of modern developments. As one nativist tract explained, Americans “belong to secret organizations because the rank and file of the army do not know its leaders.” Thus they turned to the anti-politician, anti-party, secretive populist movement known as the American party. This explained in part why the Know Nothing party was so successful in Massachusetts, a state that led the nation in the antebellum era in the expansion of factory and machine production, and in other urbanized cities.²⁶⁰

While the problems of modernity and sectional strife surely contributed to the rise of the Know Nothing party, this secret organization could not have attained its overwhelming influence without appealing to a fully entrenched culture of anti-Catholicism, furnished in part by convent literature. *Our Country*, a promotional book for the American party, contended that the Know Nothings formed to protect the country from “the insidious workings of Jesuits” who work to “establish here the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church, to be followed by its concomitants, ignorance, superstition,

²⁵⁹ Jacob Brown, *An Address Delivered at Castle Garden, Feb. 22, 1854, Before the Order of United Americans, on the Occasion of their Celebration of the One Hundred and Twenty-Second Anniversary of the Birthday of Washington*, by Jacob Broom, Esq. (New York: Bro. Wm. B. Weiss, 1854), Order of United Americans Records, New York Public Library; Carwardine, 219; Bennett, 113.

²⁶⁰ Mulkern, *The Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, 6; *A Voice to America*, 369; Mulkern, *The Know Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, 7.

lust, crime, and despotism.” “The great evil which threatens our peace,” the book explained further, “comes in the name of religion. . . . We need scarcely say that we refer to the Romish Church.” Historian Richard Carwardine argues that “At the heart of the American party’s appeal . . . lay not economic nativism nor Unionism . . . but manipulation of the nation’s profound anti-Catholicism, and a call for social and political reforms to protect Protestant republicanism.”²⁶¹

Proponents of the American party broke into factions over temperance and slavery, but nativism united them, the interests of which Know Nothing legislators made their chief concern. Governors and legislatures joined forces against Paddy and the Pope, disbanding Irish militia units, dismissing Irish state workers, expanding residency requirements for naturalizations, and depriving Roman Catholics of the right to hold public office. The fear of a Catholic conspiracy drove such policies. “Had Catholics, like other citizens . . . exercised the right of suffrage as individuals, without respect to the religious associations,” explained one nativist book, “the ‘Know-Nothings’ would never have sprung into existence.” Members of the OUA promised not to marry a Roman Catholic, come “under the influence of any Roman Catholic institution,” and not to “associate as a friend with a Roman Catholic.” Unless they “wish[ed] to become the subjects of the Pope,” OUA members vowed to “protect the land left . . . by the immortal Washington” from the “anti-republican religion of Jesuits and priests.”²⁶²

²⁶¹ William Henry Ryder, ed. *Our Country: or, The American Parlor Keepsake* (Boston: J.M. Usher, 1854), 55, 166; Carwardine, 220.

²⁶² For Know Nothing disagreements on temperance and slavery, see Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, 102-103; Ryder, ed. *Our Country*, 55, 166; Anspach, *The Sons of the Sires*, 30; *Astounding Developments!!! A Combination of Traitors Exposed!! Americans Beware!* (New York; 1855), Order of United Americans Records, New York Public Library.

The single greatest way in which the “Papists” gained traction in the land of the free, argued the American party, was through convents, or what nativists often called “imperium in imperio.” Spokespersons for the Know Nothing party echoed sentiments expressed in convent narratives, such as Josephine Bunkley’s characterization of “these nunneries...[as] one of the favorite institutions of popery in Protestant countries, [which] have been employed with much effect in the US.” One nativist book alleged convents to be “the pillars and bulwarks of the Romish imperium in all countries that have been cursed by its presence.” The author continued, warning Americans that the See of Rome had “already established its strong-holds” in the United States through convents. “It [wa]s against this dangerous power, against this *imperium in imperio*,” declared a Know Nothing spokesperson, “that the American party has assumed an attitude, not offensive, but defensive.” To defend the country’s women, the party promised to “ask for such legislation that none may be imprisoned in a convent against their will, and that parents may have the right to explore those dens into which their offspring have been enticed.”²⁶³

One of the most popular literary genres of the era, city mysteries, also helped secure a Know Nothing triumph. Convincing readers of the lurking corruption in cities wrought by lax immigration regulation, political graft, loose moral codes, and a move away from traditional values. City mysteries drew tremendously from convent narratives. They incorporated certain plot lines and themes. Like convent narratives, city mysteries also relied on the motif of disguise, presenting some of the worst villains veiled by a cloak of virtue. While city mysteries emerged after the appearance of convent narratives, publishers continued to churn out convent stories as city exposés lined bookstore shelves.

²⁶³ Bunkley, 268; Anspach, 200.

Each genre reinforced to readers a sense of impending doom, of a changing America, of some creeping infiltration of danger. As they held readers attention through Gothic devices, sensationalism, and salacious details, they nevertheless emphasized the need to maintain a native, virtuous, family-oriented, and Protestant nation. With the aid of such popular literature, the American or Know Nothing party enjoyed remarkable success in the decade before the Civil War.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NUNNERY SLEUTHS: CONVENT INVESTIGATIONS AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY

For a long time we had heard it said that the legislature of Massachusetts, which is composed chiefly of “Knownothings” (a secret society hostile to Catholics) had named a committee to visit religious institutions. –Convent Annals, Roxbury (1855)²⁶⁴

At the Notre Dame Academy for girls in Roxbury, Massachusetts, Caroline Crabb lay sick in bed. The young boarder held still as Mary Aloysia, the mother superior at the Academy, “applied remedies” to her, hoping to relieve the “bad humors.” As she performed the arduous duty, two coaches of Know Nothings, recently elected to the Massachusetts legislature, along with sixteen of their friends and associates, arrived unannounced at the Academy. The time was around eleven o’clock in the morning. After asking an attendant sister if she objected to a visit by a “committee of the Massachusetts legislature,” the group of men made their way into the building, fanning out into the halls, stomping and shouting as they poked into various rooms. Some of the girls became alarmed, one shrieking, “The house is full of Know Nothings!” The superior rose from her patient’s bedside, assuring her not to be frightened, and left the room.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ “Convent Annals, Roxbury, 1854-1868,” Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (Boston/Ipswich Archives) (March 1855), 13.

²⁶⁵ “Convent Annals, Roxbury, 1854-1868,” Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (March 1855), 14; for a description of the Massachusetts’ Nunnery Committee’s investigation of the Roxbury Academy, see John R. Mulkern, “Scandal Behind the Convent Walls: The Know-Nothing Nunnery Committee of 1855,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 11, issue 1 (1983): 22-34; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of Nativism* (1938; repr. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 413-7; and Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston: In the Various Stages of Its Development, 1604-1943*, vol. 1 (Boston: The Pilot Publishing Company, 1945), 686-703; for a contemporary critique of the investigation, see Charles Hale, “‘Our Houses are our Castles’: A Review of the Proceedings of the Nunnery Committee, of the Massachusetts Legislature; and Especially their Conduct and that of their Associates on the Occasion of the Visit to the Catholic School in Roxbury, March 26, 1855,” (Boston: Published at the Office of the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, 1855); for a useful overview of medicine in pre-Civil War America, see John Duffy, *From Humors to Medical Science: A History of American Medicine* 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,

Joseph Hiss, the “Grand Worshipful Instructor” of the Massachusetts Know Nothings and newly elected member of the House, along with a few other men barged into the Academy’s small chapel, interrupting the prayers of one sister. The startled woman got up to leave the room, but Hiss followed her, corning her in the hall as other men turned over chairs in the chapel, peering suspiciously beneath them. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he asked sardonically, “How do you like living in a convent?” “Wouldn’t you enjoy going out into the world again?” The woman offered no reply to the stranger as Hiss lifted and fondled the rosary that hung from her waist. Between winks and leers he asked what punishments she suffered and whether she would like to go with him to Montreal for a spell, alluding to Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* and the tawdry reputation Monk received after her alleged “escape.” Declining the offer and referring the man to the superior, the woman finally ducked away from the Grand Worshipful Instructor.²⁶⁶

Meanwhile, two members from the committee entered the bedroom of the sick girl. With her eyes tightly shut in feigned sleep, Caroline lay perfectly still as strange men filed into the small alcove. She later recalled smelling cigars from their hot breath as they hung over her bedside. The investigators poked into every room and closet in the Academy and even inspected a sink used for the disposal of “foul water.” Using a lantern to light the way, a few sisters led the demanding examiners through the cellar. As they crept along the dank region, the nunnery sleuths repeatedly asked their guides whether

1993), chapters 1-6, and James H. Cassidy, *Medicine in America: A Short History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

²⁶⁶ Mulkern, “Scandal Behind the Convent Walls,” 25; “Investigation Into the Conduct of the Nunnery Committee at Roxbury,” *Barre Patriot* (April 13, 1855); “Statement of the Lady Superior and Sisters to the Honorable the ‘Committee to Investigate Charges Against the Committee on Nunneries,’” Roxbury, April 9, 1855, printed in the “Appendix” to Hale, “Our Houses are our Castles,” 48-50; “Convent Annals,” (March 1855), 16.

there were any boys in the house. After finding no men, “immured nuns,” or other abominations, and offering no explanation for their abrupt search, the investigators left just as swiftly as they had arrived. They convened with a larger group at the Norfolk House, a fashionable Roxbury hotel, for a night of fine dining and copious libations.²⁶⁷

Seven sisters from the order of Notre Dame de Namur operated the Roxbury School on Washington Street. By the time the Nunnery Committee launched their investigation, the sisters had been in Massachusetts about one year, coming from a Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur House in Cincinnati at the behest of Boston’s Bishop, John Bernard Fitzpatrick. Devoted specifically to the occupation of teaching, the Notre Dame Sisters operated a school open to all who wished to enroll. At the time of the investigations, the school counted twelve pupils between the ages of twelve and fifteen. In an old but well-kept schoolhouse they went about their routine with the aid of one Irish maintenance man. In addition to running the Academy, the Sisters also operated a charity or free school in Roxbury which served over two hundred children. The women of the Roxbury schools allegedly got along well with their neighbors, never causing “any sort of suspicion.”²⁶⁸

When the sisters arrived in Roxbury from Cincinnati on May 8, 1854, they found their house, which would also operate as the school, a mess and promptly began cleaning. Starting from scratch with what would be their chapel, the sisters received from a local priest a small table, “from his own home,” which would serve as their altar. With their

²⁶⁷ Hale, “Houses,” 46-7; *Boston Daily Advertiser* (April 12, 1855).

²⁶⁸ Hale, “Houses,” 17-18, 48-9; Lord, et al. *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, 616-8. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur originally came to Cincinnati from Belgium; for more on the sisters, see A Member of the Congregation, *The Educational Ideals of Blessed Julie Billiart, Founder of the Congregations of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922).

preparations completed the community had their first mass “in our own little chapel” and shortly thereafter received their first pupil. By May 22, forty pupils had enrolled in the school. In the early days of the foundation, the sisters put out a fire (started accidentally by the hired man) and endured a carriage ride pulled by a frightened horse which had not been broken. The sisters relied little on the Bishop; when they first arrived he was in Europe where he remained for months. After his return he visited the sisters occasionally, but did not meddle in their affairs. The sisters showed him deference, however, inviting him to dinner and having a few select pupils play the piano and sing for him before “addressing him four little compliments.”²⁶⁹

By December, three hundred persons in the diocese received the sacrament of confirmation (or formal admittance into the church), “at least one half of them being instructed by our Sisters.” As the number of converts and pupils increased, the sisters busily engaged in working with an architect to construct a new school—the old one being too small. As they busied themselves with preparations for the new building, the sisters heard rumors about a visit from Know-Nothing legislators. They had heard that the Know Nothings “had named a committee to visit religious institutions” and they expected them “any day.” But while the sisters expected “five or six of them,” they were surprised when “at least twenty-four” men arrived on March 26.²⁷⁰

The Bay State legislature had formed a “Nunnery Committee” along with passing a flurry of other measures shortly after the sweeping Know Nothing victory in the state elections. During the early, bitter cold days of January 1855, the new legislators convened. The House “was unusually busy with a batch of new Know Nothing

²⁶⁹ “Convent Annals,” (May-January, 1854), 3-6, 9.

²⁷⁰ “Convent Annals,” (January-March, 1855), 10-11; 13-14.

movements,” reported the *Pittsfield Sun*. In an effort to stay politically afloat, Free-Soilers had joined Know Nothings, agreeing to a series of nativist programs. Among them, the government ordered the removal of hundreds of mental patients and Irish paupers to Liverpool, amended the constitution to deny naturalized citizens and Catholics the opportunity to hold public office, disbanded the Irish militia, and mandated reading of the King James Bible in public schools. A suggested, though not adopted, measure proposed “requir[ing] Catholics, on being naturalized, to renounce allegiance to the Pope.” The men also addressed a flood of petitions requesting nunnery investigations from twenty-seven different towns, including Foxboro, Ludlow, Milford, Oxford, and Marlboro. Wasting no time, the speaker promptly named a committee for the task.²⁷¹

As in Massachusetts, Know-Nothing constituents in other states demanded swift action against “nunneries.” In 1854 the *New York Observer* stated “we must have laws in our several States by which the practice may be broken up of confining young women in nunneries.” The article went on, estimating that “scores of young ladies in conventual establishments [are] in this country...prisoners, in peril of body and soul.” Supposing the secret nature of convents and convent schools—a common and inaccurate theme in anti-Catholic writings—the article asked “If these establishments are not full of abuses, why are they so scrupulously concealed from public observation?” It seemed reasonable enough for any institution, Catholic or otherwise, to be open to periodic investigation to

²⁷¹ “Massachusetts Legislature,” *Pittsfield Sun*, Massachusetts (25 January 1855); Mass., *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of Massachusetts, 1855* (Boston, 1855), Chap. 28, 108, cited in Mulkern, “Scandal Behind the Convent Walls,” 23; The petitions can be found in the *Massachusetts State Archives, Sen. Doc. 4015* (1855), cited in Lord et al., *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, 686.

ensure the safety of the American people. The *Observer* offered no ideas on “what form this new law should take,” leaving that up to the makers of the law.²⁷²

The *Christian Watchman and Reflector* echoed the call for convent investigations. Supposing the “inmates” to be likely “tired of the monotony of the cloister,” or burdened by “its tyranny,” or suffering “from its pollution,” the author argued that they “should be permitted to go free.” In this vein, the author surmised that “if the half of the [convent] scenes could be known to the community” the people “would long since have arisen and swept these establishments from the face of the earth.” The article described some of these scenes, including “kidnapping and resistance of law,” “cries of sufferers from the windows,” and “the secreting and transporting of victims from place to place.” Only the “enactment of a law to open the nunneries and give liberty to every captive who desired to be free” could solve the problem.²⁷³

The “escape” of Josephine Bunkley from St. Joseph’s, a Sisters of Charity House in Maryland provided the premise for much of the demands to investigate convents. The *New York Observer* included an excerpt from a Virginia paper about “Miss Bunkley’s escape” entitled “A Nunnery Law Wanted.” Hailed as the “Maria Monk of the 1850s,” Josephine Bunkley purportedly escaped from St. Joseph’s in Emmitsburg. The mother superior freely acknowledged Bunkley’s residence at the convent as a novice, but alleged she had never taken vows, appeared content during her time there, and that her “escape” was unnecessary as she was free to leave whenever she wished. Despite the superior’s

²⁷² “A Nunnery Law Wanted,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* (November 30, 1854), 382; see chapter four for other examples of calls for convent investigations.

²⁷³ “Nunneries,” *Christian Watchman and Reflector* (Boston, September 14, 1854).

testimony, Bunkley's "escape" made national news and her subsequent book, *The Escaped Nun*, became an instant best-seller.²⁷⁴

The book extended a conglomerate of recycled themes from previous convent narratives, including stories of lecherous priests and tyrannical mother superiors, and references to Canada, Indians, insane nuns, subterranean passages, Protestant male heroes, adventurous escaped nuns, and even "Nuns' Island," initially made popular by Maria Monk's narrative. Bunkley's account also likely appealed to a reform-minded readership concerned with Sabbath regulations and temperance laws. Breaking the Sabbath, gambling, intemperance, and prostitution apparently constituted daily life in the cloister. "The occupations of the nuns and priests in the convent on Sundays," she explained, "were such as would hardly be thought possible by the people in the States." Nuns apparently "amused themselves with games of chance," and priests wiled away the afternoon "gambling and drinking beer and wine." These corruptions, in addition to the repeated accusations of female loss of innocence, rendered convents unfit for "an intelligent and free Protestant country." Yet the day would arrive, the author promised, "when Americans would be convinced" of the evils of the convent system, and "it will no longer be necessary...to publish books like the present." For the citizens of Massachusetts, at least, that day arrived with the state's formation of a Nunnery Committee.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ "A Nunnery Law Wanted," *New York Observer* (November 30, 1854); "Escape of a Nun," *German Reformed Messenger* (December 13, 1854), p. 4210.

²⁷⁵ Josephine M. Bunkley, *The Escaped Nun, or, Disclosures of Convent Life and the Confessions of a Sister of Charity: Giving a More Minute Detail of Their Inner Life and a Bolder Revelation of the Mysteries and Secrets of Nunneries Than Have Ever Before Been Submitted to the American Public* (New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1855), 208-9, 250, 232.

The author of the preface to Bunkley's book described convents as un-American and threatening to republican values. "Nunneries or convents are of the utmost importance to Protestants of America," the author argued, "because now the efforts to establish these and other remnants of the dark ages in America is going on." Later the narrative described convents as "ruled under old and barbarous laws, formed centuries ago, in distant lands, in times of stupid ignorance." Associating Protestants and Americans with a new enlightened era and Catholics and convents with the "dark ages," reinforced a trope repeated by anti-Catholics and nativists for some time. The preface also linked American history with Protestantism, criticizing Bunkley's parents for not making her "as firm in the faith as *their* fathers." Once inside the convent, Bunkley witnessed the true decrepitude that lurked beneath deceptive appearances. She encountered a "mad woman" confined in a cell who with "disheveled hair" and in her naked body "dragged iron chains" while roaring and beating her breasts. Her savagery likely symbolized the potential retrograde fate of the nation if Americans did not stand up against these "relics of the dark ages."²⁷⁶

Josephine Marguerite Bunkley was born in 1834 and raised Episcopalian. At the age of sixteen she converted to Roman Catholicism and when she was twenty entered the Sisters of Charity at St. Joseph's Central House, in Emmitsburg, Maryland. According to the official Admissions Log of St. Joseph's, Bunkley stayed in the convent for seven months before leaving in November 1854. While Bunkley certainly resided at St. Joseph's and was familiar with the life in the convent, significant portions of her book proved impossible to collaborate. Much of the content appeared directly lifted from Robert J. Breckinridge's *Papism in the United States*. Some of the seamiest details

²⁷⁶ Bunkley, *The Escaped Nun*, 230; Bunkley, "Preface," 25, 29.

appeared in “books within the book,” such as “Confessions of a Sister of Charity,” based on “sources collected by a New York gentleman.” Another inserted piece, “Horrors of a Nunnery,” a long poem, was authored by an anonymous source. “Coralla, the Orphan Nun,” of equally unclear authorship, also drew attention away from Bunkley’s story while using her name to legitimize a series of “startling” revelations about convents.²⁷⁷

A controversy over the authorship of *The Escaped Nun* further suggested the dubious nature of the text. Claiming to be Bunkley’s agent, Charles Beale signed with De Witt & Davenport to publish *The Testimony of an Escaped Nun*. Although Beale named Bunkley as the author, in reality he and Mary Jane Stith Ushur wrote the bulk of the manuscript. In response, Bunkley applied for an injunction to keep De Witt & Davenport from publishing the book under her name. Before she could obtain the injunction, the publishers stereotyped the book and printed 4,000 copies. Harper & Brothers, operating prosperously in New York at the time, also published an edition with Bunkley listed as the author that same year. Harper’s promotion of the book reflected John Harper’s own affiliation with the Order of United Americans in New York. For one dollar, readers could buy Harper’s edition of the latest convent exposé by the latest escaped nun. According to the *Metropolitan*, however, the “escaped nun,” who was really a novice and may or may not have had to “escape,” contributed no more than twenty pages—mostly bemoaning long prayers and manual labor—to the 338 page manuscript.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ RB# 80 13-0: Seminary Sisters, 1853-1964, last entry for 1854, Daughters of Charity Archives, Emmitsburg, MD; see Robert J. Breckinridge, *Papism in the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1836); “Confessions of a Sister of Charity,” and “Horrors of a Nunnery,” in Bunkley, *The Escaped Nun*, 199-242.

²⁷⁸ “Miss Bunkley,” *New York Herald* (September 3, 1855); “List of New Works: American,” *American Publishers’ Circular and Literary Gazette* (Dec. 22, 1855), p. 253; for more information of John Harper’s affiliation with the OUA, see David H. Bennett, *Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, Revised and Updated (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 107; and *Directory, Alpha Chapter No. 1, OUA, August 1848* (New York: R. C. Root & Anthony, 1848).

Various papers reported on the “escape” of Bunkley alongside other current events, promoting her book as a legitimate account. “As an illustration of Romanism and an exposé of convent life, we cheerfully recommend it,” read *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*. Under the title, “The Jesuits Cannot Suppress It,” *The Western Reserve Chronicle* reported “De Witt & Davenport have the pleasure of presenting a fuller and more detailed account of the inner life of convents or nunneries” and promoted its reading for anyone not yet fully convinced of “criminalities practiced in convents.” “Unlike many [books] of similar character,” concluded the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, Bunkley’s book “carried conviction of its truth to the mind of the reader.” Associating Bunkley with the nativist movement, a letter printed in the *New York Herald* written by “A Know Nothing,” claimed that “as long as there is an American Party in these United States,” Bunkley, “a fugitive from a Roman Catholic Institution,” should never want for “friends or money.”²⁷⁹

Spirit of the Times, a New York magazine, offered a more ambiguous review, writing, “This is an extraordinary production and calculated to cause much excitement and difference of opinion.” *The Metropolitan: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Religion, Education, Literature, and General Information*, assumed a critical tone. “The peculiar character of this work, and the time of circumstances of its publication, induced us to lay it aside,” read the assessment. Bunkley’s book tested the boundaries of the editors’ willingness to give a “fair hearing and reply” to “unfair” and “untrue” works. The only persons to whom the book would hold any appeal, argued the editors further, were bigots

²⁷⁹ “Literary Notices,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal* (January 16, 1856); “The Escaped Nun,” *Western Reserve Chronicle* (Warren, Ohio; August 1, 1855); “Short Reviews and Notices of Books,” *The Methodist Quarterly Review* (April 1856); “To the Editor of the New York Herald,” *New York Herald* (August 20, 1855).

and “office-hunting” fanatics. The editors concluded by chastising Harpers for “not being above the temptation of issuing such a work as Miss Bunkley’s.”²⁸⁰

As in past denunciations of women’s decisions to take religious vows, those assessing Bunkley’s book attributed her choice to join the Sisters of Charity to a fascination with the outward gilding of Catholicism. Bunkley allegedly became “fascinated by the grandeur and impressiveness of Roman Catholic services.” According to another source, Bunkley became enamored with the “glare and tinsel and ‘mystery’ of Popery” before converting. Convent narratives since Maria Monk’s blamed women’s choices to join convents on shallow infatuation, coercion, or disappointment in life. Ignoring the voices of actual women who took religious vows, this belief became embedded in popular society, allowing Catholic detractors to justify convent investigations and the necessity of providing “protection” for such women.²⁸¹

Instead of relating stories of coercion or confinement, women religious often reported feeling “the call” to join convents and religious houses. Elizabeth Anne Seton, American-born Catholic convert and founder of the Sisters of Charity in U.S., expressed a “strong desire for the religious life” and even claimed God told her “Go...[and] commence the establishment.” Her following years of service teaching hundreds of pupils and overseeing houses full of “daughters” until her death surely suggested devotion more than coercion. While there aren’t many records indicating why women took religious vows, the circumstances of some members indicated a personal choice at great personal

²⁸⁰ “New Publications,” *Spirit of the Times: A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage* (January 12, 1856); *The Metropolitan* (Baltimore, 1856).

²⁸¹ “Literary Notices,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal* (Jan. 16, 1856); “Review,” *The Church Review, and Ecclesiastical Register* (January 1856); for more on stereotypical reasons for joining a convent given in anti-Catholic literature, see Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), pp. 171-2.

sacrifice. Anne Eliza Dillion joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet near St. Louis at the cost of a hefty inheritance and against her father's wishes. After studying at the Academy run by the Sisters, Dillion asked to receive the habit and became their first American postulant in 1837. Her decision suggests personal volition rather than outside compulsion.²⁸²

A stronghold of nativism since the riot before a Carmelite Convent in 1839 and the organization of the American Republican Party two years later, Maryland proved susceptible to anti-Catholic propaganda. Although the nativist party fared poorly in the 1840s, outspoken Presbyterian ministers, such as Andrew B. Cross and Robert J. Breckinridge, kept the embers burning. Their *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* informed readers that convents served as prison houses for women, and that a Catholic conspiracy was underway by missionary priests in the American West. Cross's *Priests' Prisons for Women* especially primed Maryland citizens for the disclosures of Josephine Bunkley. By the time of its publication, Bunkley's book flew off bookstore shelves throughout the state, including the popular shop of W. S. Crowley, a member of a nativist lodge, on Baltimore Street. In the 1855 elections Know Nothings gained control of Maryland's lower house, occupying fifty-four assemblymen positions and eight senatorial seats. Their victory, in part, stemmed from the state's history of anti-Catholicism.²⁸³

²⁸² John Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (City: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004), 2; Joseph Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Frarar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), 227-8, ff; Sister Mary Lucinda Savage, *The Congregation of St. Joseph of Carondelet: A Brief Account of Its Origins and Its Work in the United States, 1650-1922* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1923), Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet Archives, St. Louis, MO.

²⁸³ Jean H. Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977), 4-5, 81; See also Benjamin Tuska, *Know-Nothingism in Baltimore, 1854-1860* (New York, 1930); Sister Mary McConville, *Political Nativism in the State of Maryland* (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America, 1930); and Laurence Frederick Schmeckebier, *History of the Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1899).

While Maryland's legislators voted consistently on nativist resolutions, including raising the requisite residence for citizenship to twenty-one years, and excluding the arrival of "all paupers and persons convicted of crime from landing on our shores," they sharply disagreed on the question of state nunnery investigations. Although referring to women religious as "female prisoners," and receiving multiple requests for the release of such female inmates, the delegates concluded that the writ of habeas corpus provided such women sufficient protection and precluded investigations. It is perhaps not surprising that the state that witnessed the greatest Know Nothing victories, Massachusetts, was also the one that saw consensus, formation, and execution of a Nunnery Committee.²⁸⁴

Unlike Maryland, although perhaps inspired by the state's latest "escaped nun," no one in the Massachusetts General Court voiced opposition to the formation of a "Joint Special Committee on the Inspection of Nunneries and Convents." The committee was charged to investigate Catholic institutions, "known as convents and nunneries," where "women are forever barred from leaving . . . however much they desired to do so." A petition for the formation of this committee attested to the belief "that acts of villainy, injustice and wrong are perpetrated within the walls of said institutions." The same day a member of the House read a petition to form a committee for this investigation, the Speaker assigned members from both houses to the task. They included "John Littlefield of Foxborough, Joseph Hiss of Boston, Nathan King of Middleborough, Joseph H. Lapham of Sandwich, and Stephen Emery of Orange." The following day the President of the Senate named two additional members: "David K. Hitchcock of Newton, and

²⁸⁴ Baker, *Ambivalent Americans*, 88-9; Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 416. The Know Nothing Party enjoyed greatest success in Massachusetts, winning 63 percent of the total vote, all but three seats in the lower house, and 40 senate seats. See Mulkern, "Scandal," 22-3.

Gilbert Pillsbury of Ludlow.” After Hitchcock declined the task, suggesting the controversial nature of the committee, the Senate appointed Streeter Evans of Salisbury to the committee. Five representatives and two senators, all new members, thus completed the committee.²⁸⁵

At the time of the Nunnery Committee’s formation, only a few convents existed in the Commonwealth. The Sisters of Charity had a house in the state and there were four convents of the Sisters of Notre Dame. The Notre Dame Sisters resided on Lancaster Street in Boston, in Roxbury, Lowell, and Salem. These sisters were “active,” rather than cloistered, meaning they traveled and worked outside of the convent at times.²⁸⁶ The stark contrast between the public and political outcry against convents and the number of them in actual existence in the state speaks to influence of anti-convent propaganda. So sure were citizens of the Commonwealth of the imminent dangers posed by convents that they launched an attack against a virtually non-existent threat. The relative lack of women’s religious orders in Massachusetts perhaps also lent an aura of mystery to the institutions. It was easy to believe the descriptions of convent life presented in accounts such as *The Escaped Nun* when there were few convents around to challenge such descriptions.

The delegates thus necessarily broadened the description of the committee, authorizing its members to search all “Theological Seminaries, Boarding schools, [and] Academies,” in addition to “Nunneries [and] Convents.” Under this order, the committee could have investigated at least a thousand Protestant institutions in the state. Yet they never searched any Protestant institution, singling out Catholic establishments, reflecting

²⁸⁵ “Report of the Committee of Inquiry,” Appendix D, in Hale, *Houses*, 55; Hale, *Houses*, 12-3.

²⁸⁶ Karen M. Kennelly, “Women Religious in America,” Michael Glazier and Thomas J. Shelley, eds. *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 1496, 1491; Hale, 11.

the centrality of anti-Catholicism in the Know Nothing movement. Simply scrolling through the table of contents in various Know Nothing books confirmed this position. In *Startling Facts for Native Americans Called "Know-Nothings,"* for instance, chapter titles included, "Contest Between the Pope and the Bible," "Abominations of Jesuitism," "Catholics Owe No Allegiance to the United States," "Licentiousness: The Fruit of Celibacy," and "Nunneries," to name a few. By "creating an intense feeling against Roman Catholics," wrote one author about Baltimore, the Know Nothings "very nearly succeeded in making a clean sweep."²⁸⁷

Days before the Massachusetts' nunnery investigations, Know Nothings in Rhode Island prepared to attack a Sisters of Mercy house in Providence. After Miss Rebecca Newell, a single woman from a Congregationalist family, converted to Catholicism and applied to become member of the Mercy Sisters, rumors circulated about town questioning the authenticity of Newell's decision. In predictable fashion papers reported on Newell being held in the convent against her will and her need of rescuing. The *Providence Journal* attempted to correct such assumptions, claiming "however unpleasant it may be to see a young lady of high intelligence and character forsake the religion of her fathers," Miss Newell had made her decision "of her own free will." Nevertheless, crowds gathered outside the convent in the coming days, chanting "Unlock your prison and free the beautiful Yankee girl." Coming from Salem, Boston, and Taunton, Know Nothings responded to the call.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ "Closing Statement of the Editors of the Boston Daily Advertiser," Appendix C, in Hale, *Houses*, 50; "Two Articles from the Boston Daily Advertiser," Appendix A, in Hale, *Houses*, 44; *Startling Facts for Native Americans Called "Know-Nothings," Or, A Vivid Presentation of the Danger to American Liberty, to be Apprehended from Foreign Influence* (New York, 1855); Tuska, *Know-Nothingism in Baltimore*, 7.

²⁸⁸ Fialka, *Sisters*, 51-2.

On March 22, 1855, all signs pointed to an imminent riot. The growing mob positioned powder kegs while Bishop Bernard O'Reilly of Providence gathered Irish laborers with concealed weapons to guard the convent. The bishop then addressed the crowd, numbering in the hundreds, stating his willingness to protect the sisters "with my blood if need be." The owner of the house, Mr. Stead, a wealthy local man who had offered a more substantial home to the sisters, alerted the mob to the "four hundred strong Irishmen" and warned them that if they attacked the house, their own homes, where many Irish servants worked, would not be safe. The moment passed and the crowd dispersed shortly after.²⁸⁹ Although a riot had been averted, the periodic outrage expressed at women entering convents and the belief that they were held against their will proved powerful throughout various states, providing the seedbed for the Nunnery Committee in Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts Nunnery Committee first visited Holy Cross College in Worcester. After finding nothing objectionable, they ventured to the Roxbury School operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame. A number of "friends"—members of the legislature and otherwise—joined the seven committee members in their investigations. As a result, concluded one critic later, "the party ceased to be a committee, and assumed the character of a mob or accidental collection of individuals." Three days later, on March 29, the committee visited a Catholic School at Lowell, also conducted by the Notre Dame Sisters. A group of twenty-four men—four from the Nunnery Committee, four other members of the legislator, and sixteen "friends"—traveled twenty-six miles to

²⁸⁹ Fialka, 51-3.

get there and performed a similarly swift investigation of the Lowell school before staying the night in the Washington Hotel.²⁹⁰

The Nunnery Committee never visited the rest of the institutions on their list. Public outcry against the Committee prevented it. The first and most vocal source of opposition came from the Boston *Daily Advertiser*. Charles Hale, editor of the paper, had been an avid critic of the Know Nothings for some time. Hale believed that the Nunnery Committee's actions violated the fourth Amendment of the Constitution. He presented the members' entrance into the Catholic institutions as an "unwarranted search" and a "violation of privacy." Casting the institutions as "homes," Hale asserted "the right of the people to be secure in their persons and houses, against unreasonable searches and seizures. Having no warrant or concrete justification for the search, Hale concluded the committee's actions violated one of the most precious rights held by the people of the United States and especially those living in Massachusetts. Although referring to women, Hale contended further that a man's house "is his castle; in which he reigns supreme...without hindrance from the State government." After the publication of Hale's scathing critique of the Nunnery Committee, he went on to be its most formidable foe, writing a pamphlet entitled "Our Houses Are Our Castles," and presiding at the subsequent investigation of the Nunnery Committee.²⁹¹

As co-editor with his father, Nathan Hale, of the staunchly Whig Boston *Daily Advertiser*, Charles Hale was a recognizable name in the community. His family, elite New Englanders, could trace their heritage back to the first settlers in colonial

²⁹⁰ "Report to the Joint Committee on the Inspection of Nunneries and Convents," April 24, 1855, *House Doc. 4015* (1855) (Mass. State Arch.), cited in Lord, *History of the Archdiocese*, 687; Hale, *Houses*, 18, 15, 39.

²⁹¹ Hale, 26, 20; Hale's criticism in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* appeared first on March 31, 1855.

Massachusetts. Hale attended private school before attending Harvard where he graduated in 1850. He specialized in Massachusetts political commentary, writing such works as *Journal of the Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of Delegates, Chosen to Revise the Constitution of Massachusetts, Begun and Holden at Boston, November 15, 1820* (1853), which he co-wrote with his father, and *Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Held in the Year 1788, and Which Finally Ratified the Constitution of the United States* (1856). His exposure of the Know Nothing Nunnery Committee, however, helped him achieve a seat in the State House in 1855 for which he ran as a Republican. In 1859, the House elected him Speaker—the youngest member to hold the position. Hale possessed no fondness for the Catholic Church, but he disagreed with Know Nothing policies that discriminated against Catholics and other minorities, perceiving their policies as a threat to civil liberties. While he truly disapproved of the dealings of the Nunnery Committee, he likely saw the investigations as an opportunity to exploit the hated nativist party in hopes of hastening their decline.²⁹²

A second part of Hale’s critique condemned the Nunnery Committee for being “ungentlemanly.” No true gentleman, he argued, “would venture to call upon any lady with whom he is not acquainted,” let alone peep around in her bed chamber. Entering the bedchamber of a lady who is a stranger, he contended further, was an “act so gross, so repulsive to all notions of refinement, that no gentleman can perform it.” Defining the

²⁹² Charles and Nathan Hale, *Journal of Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of Delegates, Chosen to Revise the Constitution of Massachusetts* (Boston: The Office of the Daily Advertiser, 1853); Charles Hale, *Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Held in the Year 1788, and Which Finally Ratified the Constitution of the United States* (Boston: W. White, 1856); “Honorable Charles Hale, Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives,” *Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion (1855-1859)* 16, no. 4 (January 22, 1859); “Hale, Charles,” in *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), 96-7.

term “gentleman” as characterized by “Respect for Truth, Respect for Woman, [and] Respect for Religion,” Hale condemned the Nunnery Committee and their supporters as violating all three, and thus being a far cry from gentlemen. Ironically, the Nunnery Committee responded to what appeared to be a very gentlemanly calling: to defend helpless women in the face of oppression. The rhetoric of protection and female defenselessness engendered support for convent investigations and inspired the formation of the Nunnery Committee. The dual interpretations of gentlemanly conduct, thus, revealed the malleability of the term and its importance as a value to the general public. Before the trial over the Nunnery Committee’s actions, Hale visited the Roxbury Academy to learn “whether there had been anything in his article which was not just.” The sisters confirmed his account.²⁹³

Americans in the 1850s placed great weight on men being gentlemanly. The term “Christian Gentleman” became ubiquitous in the nineteenth-century Victorian era, denoting men who had self-control, were civilized, and displayed respectable conduct—especially toward women. Many who supported convent investigations likely acted out a sense of gentlemanly responsibility to protect women. From Maria Monk to Josephine Bunkley, convent narratives described the dangers—especially to sexual purity—that women faced in convents. Bunkley’s book warned mothers that “their daughters would be exposed to any treatment that the men who have control within the walls might choose to subject them.” And those men, continued the narrative, were “of the most degraded and vicious of the human race.” In response, Protestant gentlemen in the narrative launched an investigation of the convent. Some of the worst accusations against convent life were voiced not only by enterprising authors but also by often-sincere prominent,

²⁹³ Hale, 30, 32, 37; “Convent Annals,” (April, 1855), 22.

respectable men, preachers and politicians. Their calls to action justified convent investigations and possible bans on women's religious communities on the basis of gentlemanly duty. Such invocations surely resonated with an American populace increasingly embracing Victorian mores. Obligations of gentlemen could be used to both justify and condemn convent opposition.²⁹⁴

Other critics of the Nunnery Committee resorted to parodies, dubbing the group the "Smelling Committee." As the members "behaved in such an undignified, ludicrous, peaking, bombastical manner," they appeared to some as sniffing dogs. The title caught on, inspiring anti-Know Nothing groups to publish cartoons of the nunnery investigators "smelling" their way around Catholic institutions. Picturing men peeping around the most benign objects, as chairs, bowls, and wagon wheels, the illustrations satirized their suspicion of the Roxbury Academy. "The investigator discovers a dilapidated cart-wheel, and is heart sick at the thought of the poor victims who have been broken on it," read one caption. Another pictured a man peering under a bed with a caption reading, "What was here discovered has not yet been revealed." While the cartoon highlighted the ridiculous suspicions of the Nunnery Committee, such accusations of torture devices in convents and other hidden crimes had saturated convent narratives for two decades, leading otherwise rational citizens to doubt the dealings of female religious houses.²⁹⁵

The Massachusetts Nunnery Committee even attracted attention outside New England. "The extraordinary movements of our legislature in reference to nunneries" has

²⁹⁴ Bunkley, 106; for more on the meaning of the term "gentleman" in nineteenth-century America, see Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class, and Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 25 (May 1973): 131-153; and Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

²⁹⁵ "The Nunnery or 'Smelling Committee,'" *Sun* (Pittsfield, MA, April 12, 1855), 2; Lord, *Archdiocese*, 689. This title caught on, appearing in various political cartoons throughout New England.

been “a general topic of newspaper comment...throughout the United States,” reported one paper. The *Commercial Advertiser*, a prominent New York paper, condemned the committee for displaying “religious intolerance and persecution.” Presenting the matter as an issue of religious freedom, and likely referring to other nativist agenda items by the Bay State government, the *Advertiser* argued “It is not safe to introduce religious questions into our popular elections, for the moment you make religious majorities in the legislature, you practically make religion a state matter.” Yet even this criticism revealed deep-seeded anti-Catholicism, as the writer compared the actions of the committee with “the very Romanism which they profess so utterly to abhor.”²⁹⁶

John Bernard Fitzpatrick, the third Bishop of Boston, also wrote in protest to the state’s House of Representatives after hearing about the Nunnery Committee’s investigations of Roxbury. Fitzpatrick noted that any order of religious women would be willing to explain the nature of their work and life to investigators. Yet when those investigations became offensive or unpleasant, he must object. If such investigations continued, he went on, the sisters, with his help, would be “compelled legally to assert and defend the inviolability of their dwellings.” Reflecting Hale’s critique, Fitzgerald requested that the legislature remove from its committee those members who lacked “respect, reserve, and decorum which are due from gentlemen to ladies.” Although the Legislature ignored Fitzpatrick’s protest, they were compelled to respond to the mounting public criticism of the “smelling committee.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ “The Nunnery Visitation,” *Barre Patriot* (April 13, 1855), quoting from the New York *Commercial Advertiser*.

²⁹⁷ Bishop Fitzpatrick to the Massachusetts General Court, undated (Boston Dioceses Archives), cited in Lord, *Archdiocese*, 690-1.

Public outcry forced the Great and General Court to establish a Joint Committee to investigate the doings of the nunnery sleuths. Before a standing room crowd, on the morning of April 7, the committee met for an open hearing. Several members of the Nunnery Committee testified to the “exemplary” nature of their conduct at the Notre Dame Academy. Charles Hale, who had received permission to participate in the hearing, asked John Littlefield, the Chairman of the Nunnery Committee for the House, what evidence the committee cited to justify the search in the first place. Did they have “good grounds for the belief that there were abuses in these schools demanding legislative interference?” Littlefield replied that the evidence was sufficient, but that he “would report to the legislature and not to Mr. Hale.” The committee never subsequently made the evidence public, leading Hale to conclude that “it appeared to them probable that general rumors and statements were the ground of proceeding.” The subsequent report, agreeing with Hale, suggested that “general rumors” instead of “specific” evidence provided the grounds for the search. The report stated further that “some of the visitors [to Roxbury] were attracted by curiosity...[and] others were there for no assignable cause.”²⁹⁸

The only justification for the search uncovered by the investigations came from a personal testimony by William B. May, a member of the Nunnery Committee. Before the Nunnery Committee formed, May told delegates his sister resided at a “similar institution” in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He believed convent authorities held her there against her will. He also stated that he was not allowed to visit her. May later denied making any such statement. As Hale reported, May visited his sister in Emmitsburg, and

²⁹⁸ Mulkern, “Scandal,” 24; *Boston Daily Advertiser* (April 11, 1855); Hale, *Houses*, 14; “Report of the Committee of Inquiry,” cited in Hale, *Houses*, Appendix D, 57-8.

“no objection whatever was made to his seeing her; she was not detained against her will; [and] she had no wish to leave the place.” This being the only substantial evidence on which the General Court based its decision to form a Nunnery Committee suggests the influence of convent narratives and especially that of Josephine Bunkley’s, as she was a resident at the St. Joseph House in Emmitsburg. Her story, likely familiar to members of the legislature, surely validated May’s claims about his sister.²⁹⁹

On April 10th Mary Aloysia, the mother superior at the Roxbury Academy took the stand during the investigative hearings. Although the investigators called on all of the sisters, only Mary Aloysia appeared. Aloysia presented a statement from her community, explaining the absence of the other sisters and why they found fault with the Nunnery Committee’s investigation. Instead of appealing to a general invasion of privacy, Aloysia complained that one of inspectors lingered behind after the rest of the crew departed. He told her that he had drifted from the faith and hoped to return before asking if they could have an “agreeable conversation” on the topic. Believing he had ulterior motives, the superior suggested “in a very serious way” that he speak with a priest about the matter, at which point he left. When Hale asked Aloysia to identify the man, she pointed to Joseph Hiss. In a cross-examination, one of the senators asked the superior if she thought the actions of Hiss improper before she read critical reviews of the committee in the Jesuit newspapers. The superior informed him that she did.³⁰⁰

More forthright in the “Annals” of the Roxbury Academy, Aloysia wrote that she “tremble[ed] with emotion and indignation, so that I could hardly speak” when the Know

²⁹⁹ Hale, *Houses*, 15.

³⁰⁰ Mulkern, “Scandal,” 24-5; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, (April 2 and 13, 1855); Investigating Committee to the Sisters of Notre Dame and Caroline Crabb, April 9, 1855, *Senate Doc. 4295* (Mass. State Archives), cited in Lord, 692; “Convent Annals,” (March 1855), 17-8.

Nothings had arrived at the school and announced their intentions to search the building. Although the superior consented to the search, she described it as a “famous and villainous inquisition.” She described their thorough search of the premises and criticized Hiss—the “biggest rascal” and “wicked fellow” of the search committee for barging into one of the classrooms and questioning the pupils. As Aloysia likely felt more comfortable expressing herself in the community’s *Annals*, which in many ways served as a sort of daily journal for the sisters, the outrage she expressed suggested her truest feelings about the Nunnery Committee.³⁰¹

After staying on the stand the entire day, the committee requested Aloysia return the next day with Sister Mary Joseph and Caroline Crabb. Sister Mary Joseph testified to Hiss cornering her in the hall outside the chapel, further incriminating the Grand Worshipful Instructor, and Crabb described the men who entered her bedroom where she lay sick. What appalled investigators the most, however, was the discovery of the “party of pleasure” enjoyed by the Nunnery Committee and their friends after their search at the Norfolk House. There the group enjoyed a sumptuous and expensive dinner along with copious amounts of champagne “and other liquor forbidden by law to be sold in the State,” at the tax-payers’ expense.³⁰²

Aloysia and the other Notre Dame Sisters expressed horror at all the public attention they received in light of the Nunnery Committee’s investigations. In her daily account, Aloysia wrote of the various papers that took up the story, “some of them being for us and others against us,” describing it all as being “mortifying to me.” She and the other sisters, she claimed, “began to fear, and with reason, that we would be cited to

³⁰¹ “Convent Annals,” (March, 1855), 16-7.

³⁰² Investigating Committee to the Sisters of Notre Dame and Caroline Crabb, April 9, 1855, *Senate Doc. 4295* (Mass. State Archives), cited in Lord, 692.

appear before the court.” For women who had taken vows that wed them to lives of modesty and separation from the world, such attention chafed against their vocational sensibilities. The Nunnery Committee in effect forced these women into the public light, making them a part of a spectacle. The women received a notice on Easter Sunday during dinner that their presence was requested the next day in court. “Fatal news for such a holy day!” Aloysia remarked. Reflecting on her entrance into the court, Aloysia wrote, “It seemed to me as if I were being conducted to the gallows.” After what turned into three days of questioning—during which time the sisters had arranged for substitute teachers to instruct their pupils—the court dismissed the superior and Sister Mary Joseph.³⁰³

Shortly after the Easter holiday, the Investigating Committee issued a report. The report upheld “the sacred rights of the domicile, and the right of the press to criticize the action of legislatures,” but suggested “no action.” The report quoted a spokesperson for the Nunnery Committee stating, “We were appointed to *investigate* only...[and] have performed the unwelcomed task fearlessly. Without fear, favor, affection or hope of reward, we have done the work with which we are charged.” The report further condemned “the accompaniments of outsiders” in the investigation, and “the banquets indulged in by the committee” as such actions could be “excused on the ground of precedents.” As for Hiss, the committee accused him of “improprieties,” but not “criminal conduct.”³⁰⁴

Before being named “Grand Worshipful Instructor” of the Boston Know Nothing Chapter, state representative, and informal leader of the Nunnery Committee, Hiss had worked as a tailor. Under pressure from his creditors, he moved from his home town of

³⁰³ “Convent Annals,” (April, 1855), 18-21.

³⁰⁴ “Another Farce Closed,” *Farmers’ Cabinet* (April 26, 1855).

Barre, Massachusetts to Boston where he rose in the Know Nothing ranks. He presided as secretary of its State Convention shortly before the state elections and as Judge Advocate of the secret order. Known more for his “ingratiating personality” and confident smiles, Hiss was well-liked by his associates who mostly overlooked any lack of political acumen.³⁰⁵

Not long after the release of the first Report, the House voted to scrap the document. The state buzzed with rumors of even greater improprieties taken by members of the committee, including stories of some of them visiting “secular nunneries” or brothels during the romp. Charles Hale pushed hardest for further investigations after uncovering details about the Nunnery Committee’s stay in the Washington Hotel after their visit to a Catholic school in Lowell. Another special committee investigated these charges. They discovered that the Nunnery crew enjoyed a second night of carousing after the Lowell investigation. At the Washington Hotel, they charged dinner, cigars, gin, and lodging to the Commonwealth.³⁰⁶

During this investigation, Hale made a startling accusation that Hiss had taken a woman other than his wife to the hotel. Charging this “woman of the evening” along with other fineries, to the State, Hiss registered her at the Washington Hotel. Hale pointed to the name of “Mrs. Patterson” which appeared among the hotel’s guest-list registered by Joseph Hiss. On the stand, Hiss claimed that he had run into an old friend who had asked him to escort Mrs. Patterson to the hotel. Stumbling through the cross-examination, however, Hiss raised suspicion among the listeners. Did Hiss know Mrs. Patterson? “I don’t think so...No...Maybe.” The investigative committee further uncovered that Hiss

³⁰⁵ Mulkern, “Scandal,” 25; Lord, 689; *Boston Daily Advertiser* (April 18, 1855).

³⁰⁶ Mulkern, 26; *Boston Daily Advertiser* (April 23, 1855).

and the so-called “Mrs. Patterson” had adjoining rooms and that one bed had not been slept in. In further investigations, witness after witness testified to the association between the woman and Hiss, leaving Hiss unable to defend himself. Days after the hearing, with a pile of accusations stacked against him, Hiss issued his resignation. While not admitting guilt, he claimed this action was necessary to quiet the “hostile press” and “save the American party.”³⁰⁷

The House appeared to agree as they dismissed Hiss but exonerated the rest of the Nunnery Committee. In its final report, members claimed that nothing would have come of the Nunnery Committee’s actions had not it not been for the hostile press and “the Jesuits.” The Committee commended Hiss for gentlemanly conduct in Roxbury, dismissing all complaints leveled by the Catholic “nuns.” The Committee was less forgiving concerning his actions at the Washington House. Here they claimed his conduct was “highly improper and disgraceful both to himself and this body of which he is a member, and we deem it such as to render him unworthy longer to occupy a seat upon the floor of this house.” Significantly, however, 150 members of the legislature absented themselves to avoid voting against Hiss. Referring to convents and similar institutions, the committee admitted that nothing in the buildings searched “warrant[ed] legislation in reference to them as convents.” But other similar institutions still existed as “prisons of innocent victims,” and surely “physical restraint” existed in those convents.³⁰⁸

In contrast to the investigative report, Charles Hale argued that the blame for the Nunnery Committee’s misadventures did not “fall on any single member of the

³⁰⁷ Lord, 694-8; Mulkern, 27; *Boston Daily Advertiser* (April 23, 1855); “Mr. Hiss and the Nunnery Committee,” *National Era* (April 26, 1855), 67; Mulkern, 29.

³⁰⁸ *Report of the Joint Committee to Investigate the Nunnery Committee, April 17, 1855, Sen. Doc. 4295* (Mass. State Arch.) cited in Lord, 695-6; Mulkern, 29; Billington, 415; Hale, *Houses*, 53-9.

committee.” Rather, he pointed to the broader environment of “ignorance and carelessness.” Nor did Hale find the Nunnery crew’s late-night reveling to be their greatest impropriety. “The cardinal offense,” he claimed “was the entrance, without right or authority, of a party of men into a private house, where their presence was neither desired nor expected.” He expressed frustration at the way in which the committee members’ partying “tended to attract more of the public attention... than the primal offense of the unjustifiable entrance of the house.” But Hale was alone in this conclusion. The legislator and the public expressed greater outrage over the Nunnery Committee’s nights of carousing than their injustice toward Catholic sisters, and targeted Hiss as a sacrificial lamb for punishment, rather than condemning any sentiment of the larger environment.³⁰⁹

As Hale suggested, the Nunnery Committee’s actions sprang from a deeply-entrenched hostile environment toward Catholics and convents, fostered in part by respected and well-known spokespersons. In the midst of the Know Nothing political triumphs, Edward Beecher, of the famous Beecher clan, delivered a speech entitled *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed*, which combined familiar religious, domestic, and political arguments against Catholicism and convents. Addressing “American Protestants and Free Men,” Beecher warned his listeners of a plot against America, under which everyone who was not Catholic would be punished through “bitter butchering.” The clearest evidence of this conspiracy was “the whole system of monasteries and nunneries established in this land.” Beecher’s speech rested on a sentimental theology of domesticity, as he described the family, in contrast to the convent, as “a little model of the universal system under

³⁰⁹ Hale 31, 22.

God...an emblem of the highest love of the universe.” Like many conspiracy theories of the era, Beecher colored his message with apocalyptic imagery, arguing “Judgment day” would reveal the horrors of convent life. From preachers to politicians, the American public learned to fear and be suspicious of Catholicism and convents.³¹⁰

Shortly after the Nunnery Investigations debacle, the Know Nothings fell from public grace. Months after the investigative hearings, Free-Soilers—a short-lived political party that opposed the expansion of slavery—broke their alliance with the Know Nothings, no longer needing their support, and created a fusionist group and that would become the Republican Party. In the following fall elections Know Nothings still prevailed, but at a much smaller margin than in 1854. By 1858, the Republican Party triumphed in the state and the Know Nothings disappeared from the political stage. The divisiveness of the slavery issue contributed significantly to this demise, but so did public disapproval of the Know Nothings, furnished in part by their embarrassing investigations of Catholic institutions.³¹¹

Massachusetts Know Nothings blamed their demise on conspiracy. A “corrupt press” had taken advantage of the Nunnery Committee scandal, blowing it out of proportion, in order to wrest political power from the Know Nothings. The defense counselor blamed the “persecution” launched at Hiss on those who aimed to “strike down the party in power.” John Mulkern in his description of the Massachusetts Nunnery Committee, appears to agree with this assessment, writing, “Hale’s scoop furnished the

³¹⁰ Edward Beecher, *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed, and Protestantism Defended, in the Light of Reason, History, and Scripture* (Boston: Stearns & Co., 1855), 8, 3, 9, 150, 202; see also Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

³¹¹ Mulkern, 31; See also William E. Gienapp, “Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North Before the Civil War,” *Journal of American History* 72:3 (Dec 1985), 529-559.

partisan Boston press with what it had been waiting for—a major Know-Nothing scandal—and it pounced on the story with glee.” To be sure, criticism from the press, especially Hale’s *Daily Advertiser*, ignited disdain for the Nunnery Committee. Yet the lack of incriminating evidence discovered by the investigators in the visited convents also discredited them. Had they found anything to validate the hordes of accusations regarding “nunneries” in convent narratives, the fate of the Nunnery Committee and perhaps the Massachusetts Know Nothings would have likely been much different.³¹²

At a national level, the Know Nothings as a political party disintegrated in the face of the all-encompassing question of slavery. In the North most Know Nothings vocally opposed the extension of slavery. One of the first acts passed by the Massachusetts Know Nothings prohibited the cooperation of state officials in returning fugitive slaves. Although the law did not condemn slavery morally, rather presenting the issue as a matter of “personal liberty,” it placed Massachusetts on a definitive side of the slavery debate. In southern states, Know Nothing legislators cooperated with Democrats. Mostly trying to avoid the issue of slavery, one Know Nothing in Maryland delivered an ambiguous speech in which he upheld “the sovereignty of the States” and opposed “any further agitation of the subject of slavery as elevating sectional hostility.” Sectional hostility infected even the American Party, however, as Know Nothings formally split in 1855 over the question of slavery. Unable to convince the public of the greater evil of “white slavery,” or convent life or that upholding all things American could keep the country united, the Know Nothings fell from prominence.³¹³

³¹² *Boston Daily Bee* (April 3, 1855); *Boston Daily Courier* (April 24, 1855); Mulkern 31, 30, 24.

³¹³ Massachusetts, *Senate Documents* 1855 (Boston, 1855), No. 162, cited in Mulkern 23; *Journal of Proceedings of the House of Delegates of the State of Maryland* (Annapolis: Requa and Wilson, 1856), cited in Baker, *Ambivalent Americans*, 87; see also Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern*

On February 22, 1856, on the anniversary of George Washington's birthday, members of the American Party convened for their first and last national convention. After pledging to "Put none but Americans on guard tonight," the party nominated Millard Fillmore, former Whig president of New York, for the presidency, and Andrew Jackson Donelson of Tennessee as his running mate. Fillmore appeared to be an ideal Know Nothing candidate. He had a record of battling the "foreign vote," he championed the Compromise of 1850, preserving the Union, and in 1855 he became a member of a Buffalo Know Nothing lodge. Despite recent set-backs, Know Nothings expressed high hopes of securing the presidency. "There can be no room to doubt," augured one Know Nothing author in 1855, as to "the success of the American nominee for the presidency." But Fillmore was unable to garner sufficient support. His denunciation of the new Republican Party and support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act appeared overly pro-southern, while his conservative pro-Union position displeased the South. The election results signaled Fillmore's defeat and the demise of the Know Nothings as a viable political party. In New England, a Know Nothing stronghold, Fillmore received less than 30,000 votes. He faced similar crushing defeats in other parts of the country, only carrying electoral votes in the border state of Maryland.³¹⁴

At their last National Council meeting in June 1857, Know Nothings urged the party faithful to support the local party that best fit the views of the "Americans," and convened without scheduling a future council meeting. By the end of the year the new

Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 260-272.

³¹⁴ Tuska, *Know-Nothingism in Baltimore*, 12; F. R. Anspach, *Sons of the Sires; A History of the Rise, Progress and Destiny of the American Party* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1855), 178; Dale Knobel, "America for the Americans": *The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 143-4.

Republican Party had mostly absorbed the Know Nothings. As naturalized voters gravitated to the Democrats, it only seemed natural for former Know Nothings to take up with Republicans. Although factions over slavery—as members demanded more or less opposition to the peculiar institution—and “side issues,” such as nativism and temperance, existed within the Republican Party as well, party leaders ably appealed to a variety of viewpoints.³¹⁵

Republicans focused on opposing the extension of slavery and stressed the importance of this issue by highlighting the violence erupting in Kansas, or what became known as “Bleeding Kansas,” when pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions battled over the state’s status as a slave or free state in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Republican spokespersons, like William Henry Seward, described wealthy slave owners (not all southerners) as “a privileged class” whose self-interest threatened the liberties of northern whites. Unwittingly co-opting nativist cries about an imminent threat to American freedoms and values, Seward told his audience in one speech, “the constitutional safeguards of citizens...hitherto a fortress of republicanism, will pass into the hands of an insidious aristocracy.” By reflecting concern both for the black slave and the liberties of white northerners, Republicans succeeded in presenting this slave owning elite and the extension of slavery as the real conspiracy against the Republic, uniting a variety of off-shoot parties into their fold.³¹⁶

The Massachusetts Nunnery Committee may seem like a minor blip on the margins of Know Nothing history. Indeed many historians have cast it this way. In his

³¹⁵ Knobel, “*America for Americans*”, 144, 142; Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 189-90.

³¹⁶ Knobel, 152; Gienapp, 189-90; George E. Baker, ed. *The Works of William H. Seward* (5 vols.: Boston, 1853-1884), v. 4, 225-52.

book-length discussion of the Know Nothing party, Dale Knobel devoted only half a paragraph to the Massachusetts' Nunnery Committee and nativist criticism of convents in other states. John Mulkern, who has written the most extensive study on the Bay State's Nunnery Committee, described it as a "bitter fruit" of the one-party system that "threw nativist apologists into disarray" as they scrambled to atone for the obvious blunder of their co-patriots. Yet the Nunnery Committee as an embarrassing aberration from the party's main goals does not account for the unanimous support the committee received. This argument also ignores the loud and pervasive denigrations of convent life littered throughout nativist and Know Nothing literature in various states as the movement gained momentum. Although the Nunnery Committee only existed in one state, others, such as Maryland and New York entertained the idea, and only after the debacle in Massachusetts did demands for such investigations dwindle elsewhere. That the investigative committee expressed greater horror over the after-hours' carousing of the Nunnery Committee than their unconstitutional search of Catholic institutions, further reveals the abiding influence of anti-Catholicism within the Know Nothing movement. Much more than a "bitter fruit," the Nunnery Committee represented decades of public outcry against convent life and its anti-climactic results contributed to discrediting Know Nothings everywhere.³¹⁷

If not a mere aberration or blunder on behalf of a few Know Nothing outliers, what led state officials to sanction an unwarranted search targeted at "convents and nunneries"? What further enticed non-members in the legislature to join the investigations? The investigative report blamed "curiosity" as a motivation for some visitors and cited the prevalence of general "rumors." Charles Hale accused the legislators of "eagerly listen[ing]" to "baseless" and "silly" stories "regarding convents."

³¹⁷ Knobel, 122; Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, 180.

The fact that there was no suspicion distinctly relating the Roxbury Academy reveals the influence of such “general rumors.” Inundated with salacious tales of torture, sexual misadventures, murder, and general debauchery, the public wished to see firsthand what the inside of a convent was really like. So prevalent were such tales from those of Maria Monk to Josephine Bunkley, that the accusations therein became almost cliché, to a degree that even state legislators did not question their credibility. The Notre Dame Academy, thus, became an unwitting spectacle for a public’s growing appetite for convent exposure and general curiosity. But the investigating crew and their associates left the academy with their curiosity unsated. The “result of the search was a ludicrous disappointment,” argued Hale, writing that the Committee “would have been glad to find...abominations of some sort.”³¹⁸ Perhaps due to the anti-climactic investigations, the investigating crew felt the need to overcompensate with their subsequent revels at the Norfolk House and Washington Hotel.

Massachusetts legislators further justified their investigations under the belief that women were held in “nunneries” against their will. This view, perpetuated in convent narratives, supposed both a lack of agency on behalf of women who took religious vows and the need of such women for protection. Yet women religious, in Massachusetts and elsewhere, exhibited a relatively high degree of independence. Many experienced grand adventures, traveling from their homes and all that was familiar in Europe, with little financial support or social connections, to establish communities in the United States and the frontier. Joining a religious order offered women a ticket to see the larger world

³¹⁸ “Report of the Committee of Inquiry,” Appendix D in Hale, 57; Hale, 31. Pointing to the importance of convent literature, Billington in *The Protestant Crusade* argues that the Nunnery Committee searched “to find the dread evidences of Popery which propaganda writers had convinced them should be there,” 414; Hale, 30.

unencumbered by domestic obligations. Life in religious communities also afforded some ambitious women the opportunity to establish and administer large institutions, such as schools, charity wards, and hospitals. Women religious owned property and made business decisions. One Sister of Providence, recently arrived from France, wrote of the shocked expressions she received “everywhere when I appear to pay bills or make purchases.”³¹⁹ Indeed the rallying cry to protect women, which inspired so many calls for convent investigations, seemed to have been a direct response to the level of independence enjoyed by these groups of single women.

The Nunnery Committee marked both the pinnacle and the decline of the Know Nothing Party and the campaign against nuns and convent life. Although various calls to “invite investigation” into the “cruelty and suffering” of the nun’s life appeared throughout the ensuing years, the slavery issue drowned out these cries before enveloping the country in a bloody Civil War.³²⁰ As Catholic Sisters nursed wounded soldiers on both sides of the fight and Catholic men donned both the blue and gray, anti-Catholicism abated for a time. Massachusetts, though not always the focal point of the American campaign against convents, neatly bookended the movement, from its formal inauguration with the burning of Mount Benedict in 1834, to the Nunnery Committee of 1855. Within those two decades, the United States witnessed the enormous success of Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu*, the ensuing controversy over Monk’s “real story,” a heightened debate over schooling the nation’s youth that in part focused on

³¹⁹ Sister Mary Borromeo Brown, *The History of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods* (New York: Benziger, 1949), 206.

³²⁰ This quote comes from a convent narrative written in 1858, Sarah J. Richardson, *Life in the Grey Nunnery of Montreal: An Authentic Narrative of the Horrors, Mysteries, and Cruelties of Convent Life* (Boston: Damrell & Moore Printers, 1858). Other convent narratives appeared after the decline of the Know Nothings, including Ned Buntline’s best-selling *The Beautiful Nun* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1866).

convent schools, the ongoing publication of convent narratives which tapped into larger societal fears and fascinations, and the mounting of a political party, the members of which made anti-popery and convent investigations a major part of their campaign. The Nunnery Committee answered calls dating back to Maria Monk's invocation to "search!" While the public may have scoffed at the Nunnery Committee's lack of evidence to warrant their investigation, their ridiculous "smelling" around the Roxbury Academy, and their careless late-night carousing after less than an hour's worth of investigations, the Committee only reflected the demands of large sectors of the American people that had been building for quite some time.

EPILOGUE

SOLVING A PROBLEM LIKE MARIA: IMAGINING SISTERS FROM MARIA MONK TO LATE NIGHT CATECHISM

Today, the figure of the nun resides mostly in the realm of kitsch...they have become icons without a history. –Rebecca Sullivan in “A Question of Habit” (2012)

More often than not...the nun has come to represent something sinister. Many of us only have to see a nun to feel a shiver of fear run down our spine. –Scary Nuns (2007)

A Nun is at best only half a woman. –H. L. Mencken (1956)

News stories today do not offer reports on convent arsonists, Nunnery Committees, or brave escaped nuns. There is no twenty-first century equivalent of Maria Monk. It would seem that the embers of the American campaign against convents have died out, not leaving even a remnant of the flames behind. And yet an often unflattering image of the nun is ubiquitous in American culture and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* has never gone out of print. Like a jack-in-the-box, Maria Monk has popped up sporadically in different contexts. In the 1910s and 30s, *Awful Disclosures* appeared alongside a resurrected anti-Catholicism carried on by the likes of the Ku Klux Klan. During the postwar era, Monk graced arguments linking Catholicism to authoritarian regimes. She conveniently appeared alongside anti-Catholic opposition to John F. Kennedy’s candidacy for president. Although critical assessments of *Awful Disclosures* that present the book as an example of anti-Catholic bigotry are more common in the editions of the book published today, the book remains in print by various publishers who present it as historical truth.³²¹

³²¹ Ray Allen Billington offered the first critique of Maria Monk and her book in his “Maria Monk and Her Influence,” *Catholic Historical Review*, (October 1936), 287; Allen Churchill, “Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk,” *American Mercury* 37 (January 1936): 94; Billington also wrote the introduction to an edition of *Awful Disclosures* published in 1962 by Archon Books; Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1962); for a more recent critical historical edition of

Maria Monk's story and other convent narratives and propaganda of the nineteenth century contributed to the image of the nun that has persisted in American culture. In antebellum convent narratives, nuns appeared as vulnerable victims, masculine tyrants, sex slaves, silly idiots, and gothic witch-like figures. Such images still infuse modern perceptions nuns. The sweet but silly nun is emblazoned on every month of the year through the popular "Nuns Having Fun" calendar. There's the bitter crone nun ready to slap someone's knuckles with a ruler as bobble heads and in late night television skits. Recent films, such as *American Horror Story*, have kept alive the scary nun as a modern monster. And hypersexual or "naughty nuns" appear in films, Halloween costumes, and tawdry literature. Always dressed in a full habit—something few sisters actually don today—nuns appear on greeting cards, napkins, and soap; they are made into childlike figurines, action figures, and even bowling pins. Presented as anything other than human, it would seem as though the American campaign against convents continues, albeit in a different tone.

The American Civil War put a halt to the campaign against convents for a time. When war broke out, over six hundred nuns from twenty-one different communities responded by tending to the wounded and the dying. They served at the edges of battles, nursing men regardless of their uniform color, race, or creed. Sr. Mother Angela Gillespie, a Catholic convert and member of the Sisters of Mercy, founded a nursing corps to care for sick and wounded soldiers. She traveled to D.C. to petition Congress for aid and established a hospital. To commemorate the sisters' service during the war, Congress erected a monument in the nation's capital and poets lauded them as "angels of

the book, see Nancy Lusignan Schultz, ed. *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth Century Convent Tales by Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999).

the battlefield.” During the war and its immediate aftermath, sisters faced little hostility in America as they continued to operate schools, tend to the sick, and live lives of prayerful meditation. Historian Margaret Susan Thompson attributes this lull in hostility in part to nuns’ unyielding service during the war.³²²

By the 1890s and into the early twentieth century, however, anti-Catholicism and prejudice against nuns resurfaced with a vengeance. Despite the Civil War bringing together Irish, German, native, Protestant, and Catholic Americans for a time, a new burst of immigration and the industrial revolution signaled a return of nativism and anti-Catholicism. Almost nine million immigrants arrived in U.S. ports between the 1880s and 1890s. Unlike earlier groups, these “new immigrants,” came from southeastern Europe, such as Italy, the Hapsburg monarchy, Austria-Hungary, and the Russian Empire. Among the growing antagonism spurred by scientific racism and ethnic rivals among “old” and “new” immigrants for jobs and housing, groups like the National League for the Protection of American Institutions, the United Order of Native Americans, and the American Protective Association (A.P.A.) contributed to a new mass nativist movement.³²³

³²² See George Barton, *Angels of the Battlefield: A History of the Labors of the Catholic Sisterhoods in the Late Civil War* (Philadelphia: Catholic Art Publishing Company, 1898); Mary Denis Maher, *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989); Margaret Susan Thompson as quoted in the film, *A Question of Habit*, directed by Mike Whalen, Whalen Films, a Bren Ortega Murphy Film, 2012. I am indebted to Jonathan Root for alerting me to this film.

³²³ David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, revised and updated (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 160-170; see also John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, With a New Epilogue (1955; repr., New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), ch. 4; and Mark S. Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 2003), 29-30; for more specifically on the APA, see Donald L. Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964); and John Higham, “The Mind of a Nativist: Henry F. Bowers and the A.P.A.,” *American Quarterly* 4 (1952): 16-24.

Like nativists before them, A.P.A. members—whose numbers swelled to half a million by 1894—believed Catholicism to be antithetical to Americanism. As the Catholic Church’s Third Plenary Council in 1884 marked its monumental expansion in the U.S., nativists once again pointed to a conspiracy underway. Leading A.P.A. members accused Catholics of causing the depression of the early 1890s. The *A.P.A. Magazine* regularly featured anti-Catholic articles, including one titled “The Society of Jesus: Will It Set the Next Pope in Washington?” Anti-Catholics even lay the blame for President Lincoln’s assassination on “the Door of Rome.” Josiah Strong, a Congregational minister and founder of the Evangelical Alliance, warned of the Catholic threat to the republic in his book *Our Country* (1885), which went on to become a national best-seller.³²⁴

This second wave of nativism naturally revived hostility toward nuns. Publishers reprinted Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures* which the A.P.A. enthusiastically advertised. Other convent narratives appeared and went through several editions, including Edith O’Gorman’s *Convent Life Unveiled* (1871). O’Gorman traveled the world giving anti-Catholic lectures after her book release which went through thirty-six editions by 1936. Her real presence in a convent, however, was never confirmed. The era witnessed a Maria Monk prototype in the form of Margaret Shepherd, author of *My Life in a Convent*. Shepherd spoke on a lecture circuit sponsored by the A.P.A. throughout the 1890s, telling her story of life as a nun. After fathering a child from a priest, claimed Shepherd, she entered a convent in desperation. While feeling it her “duty to submit,” Shepherd suffered at the hands of “licentious and lecherous priests.” She related stories of ceremonial orgies

³²⁴ Bennett, *Party of Fear*, 171-3; Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 29-30; “The Society of Jesus: Will It Seat the Next Pope in Washington,” *A.P.A. Magazine* (San Francisco) 1 (June 1895), 1; “President Lincoln’s Assassination Is Traced Directly to the Doors of Rome,” *A.P.A. Magazine* 1 (Nov. 1895).

and beautiful young women being raped and tortured. Like earlier convent narratives, this one offered readers titillating details shrouded in a cautionary tale.³²⁵ While no one conducted a thorough investigation of Shepherd's claims to prove or disprove them, the Jordon Bros., a publishing house in Philadelphia which also printed Maria Monk's book, published the narrative, suggesting its less than reliable content.

Despite hostility from outsiders, the sisterhood flourished throughout the U.S. They built the largest private hospital system in the country, operated the most expansive private school system in the world, and provided innumerable general welfare services. Sisters were part of the nineteenth century settlement house movement. Between the Civil War and World War I, they established 479 hospitals. They taught English to a flood of immigrants, allowing them to more easily integrate into a society suspicious of non-English speaking residents. They offered newcomers and other poor members of society services otherwise denied them, such as daycare centers, homes for the aged, and burials for their dead. Sisters established the first form of health insurance, selling five dollar tickets to miners, ranchers, and other traveling workers, which when presented at a hospital would allow them access to services. Some scholars claim that these efforts contributed more than anything else in elevating the large number of Catholics in the nation into the middle and upper classes. When Catholic institutions would not admit

³²⁵ Some of the new publications of Monk's book, include Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk: Illustrated with 40 Engravings and the Startling Mysteries of a Convent Exposed!* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1870); Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Suffering During Her Residence of Five Years as a Novice and Two Years as a Black Nun in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal* (New York: D. M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1878); and Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Convent of Montreal, or, The Secrets of the Black Nunnery Revealed* (Philadelphia: Jordon Bros., 1892); Ads for Maria Monk in *A.P.A. Magazine* 2 (Mar. 1896), 943-4; Edith O'Gorman, *Trials and Persecutions of Miss Edith O'Gorman, otherwise Sister Teresa de Chantal, of St. Joseph's Convent, Hudson City, N.J.* (Hartford: Connecticut Publishing Company, 1871); O'Gorman's book subsequently took the title *Convent Life Unveiled*; for more on O'Gorman, see Augustine J. Curley, "The Identity of Edith O'Gorman, the 'Escaped Nun'"; Margaret Shepherd, *My Life in the Convent* (Philadelphia: Jordan Bros., 1893); for more on Shepherd, see Bennett, 175-6.

women to universities, sisters founded their own postsecondary institutions or attended non-Catholic ones. Sister Katherine Drexel founded Xavier University in 1915 to provide African Americans higher education. The school became accredited in the 1920s and continues to flourish.³²⁶

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, clerics called on sisters—a cheap labor source—to run their burgeoning parochial schools. Perceiving public schools in the U.S. to have a decidedly Protestant bias, the Catholic hierarchy mandated the establishment of parochial schools for the ever-growing Catholic population. American sisters almost singlehandedly created the behemoth that became the parochial school system in America, educating more than 1.7 million of the nation’s Catholic children by 1920. They staffed elementary schools, academies, industrial schools, night schools, public, private, and parochial schools. By mid-century, however, sisters began to feel taxed as they tried to keep up with educational standards and school duties while maintaining lives of prayer and their own health. Pushed into classrooms almost as soon as they entered an order, many sisters received poor training as teachers, working slowly toward their degrees—which sometimes took twenty years to complete—while overburdened with teaching responsibilities. In 1954 a group of sisters established the

³²⁶ Mary Ewens, “The Leadership of Nuns in Immigrant Catholicism,” in *Women and Religion in America: Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 101-12; *A Question of Habit*, 2012; statistic on hospitals founded referenced in George C. Stewart, Jr., “Women Religious in America,” in Michael Glazier and Thomas J. Shelley, eds., *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 1492; for more on the role of sisters in providing welfare services, see Maureen Fitzgerald, “Irish Catholic Nuns and the Development of New York City’s Welfare System, 1840-1900,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1992); Margaret McGuinness, “Body and Soul: Catholic Social Settlements and Immigration,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13 (Summer 1995): 63-75; for sources on nuns involvement in health care, see Sioban Nelson, *Say Little, Do Much: Nurses, Nuns, and Hospitals in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); and Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Sister Formation Conference (SFC) to promote education among women religious. Unwittingly, they also began discussing how to modernize the sisterhood, a topic that would be more fully explored in the Second Vatican Council.³²⁷

The first church council in almost one hundred years, Vatican II (1962-5) represented the church's gateway into the twentieth century. Notably absent among the thousands of observers and participants, however, were women. A group of women religious accepted an eventual invitation to audit the council by the third session. Mostly notably, Sister Mary Luke Tobin, served as a vocal representative for Catholic women. The council ushered in vital reforms and its resulting documents encouraged a radical rethinking of the church that focused less on the hierarchy and more on the "people of God." The spirit of openness and call to renewal engendered by the council spurred on much debate and dialogue, encouraging some sisters to reconfigure their mission. Other sisters, feeling ignored by the council, became awakened to a new sense of feminism for which they fought within the church. In either case, the council helped to create what the media called "new nuns," women who ditched their habits, earned advanced degrees, and worked in the inner city. These changes did not suit everyone. Many felt a sense of loss, including Sister Joan D. Chittister, a Benedictine who considered leaving the order. "Nothing is the same anymore," she lamented. "They don't want to teach; they don't want to wear the habit; they don't want to live together." Strangely, Vatican II signaled

³²⁷ The mandate to establish parochial schools was issued from the Third Plenary Council in Baltimore in 1884; see Peter Guilday, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792-1919* (Washington D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1923); Stewart, "Women Religious in America," *Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*, 1493-5; Ewens, "The Leadership of Nuns in Immigrant Catholicism," 101; Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 20; see also Annabelle Raiche and Ann Marie Biermaier, *They Came to Teach: The Story of Sisters Who Taught in Parochial Schools and Their Contribution to Elementary Education in Minnesota* (St. Cloud, Minn.: North Star Press, 1994).

the sharp decline of sisters in the United States. The sisterhood decreased by 42 percent between 1962 and 1992. Despite lower numbers, Vatican II signaled a shift for sisters from school rooms to the streets as they took on a plethora of social justice issues.³²⁸

In the second half of the twentieth century sisters marched alongside civil rights activists, spoke out against anti-Semitism, fought for nuclear disarmament, formed anti-war coalitions, supported the feminist movement, and worked with AIDS patients, among other ventures. Sisters Mary Joel Read and Mary Austin Doherty served as founding members of the National Organization for Women, or NOW. Long before feminism as a movement officially began, the School Sisters of Notre Dame kept files on “women in society,” “education of women,” and “women and the church.” On August 26, 1970, Sister Margaret Traxler spoke at one of the national “Women Strike” demonstrations in Chicago. “I personally will do anything which will further the cause for women,” she said with arm raised and hand clenched in a fist. A few years later the National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN) demanded “full and equal participation of women in churches.” Some sisters even embraced a pro-choice position on abortion and battled the Vatican over the issue.³²⁹

³²⁸ John J. Fialka, *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 200-6, 17; Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 20-3; see also Carmel Elizabeth McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1996).

³²⁹ Sister Rose Thering is perhaps the most well-known for her focused and successful efforts to combat anti-Semitism within the Catholic Church. Sister Rose's research regarding the presentation of Jews within Catholic educational literature and the University of St. Louis, led to Vatican II's publication of “Nostra Aetate,” declaring the Jews not guilty for the death of Jesus and condemning any displays of anti-Semitism.” For more on this, see film *Sister Rose's Passion*, directed by Oren Jacoby, Storyville Films, 2004; Rebecca Sullivan, *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 48; Carole Garibaldi Rogers, *Habits of Change: An Oral History of American Nuns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 131, 71; Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 1; for more on sisters' involvement in the civil rights movement, see Suellen Hoy, “No Color Line at the Loretto Academy: Catholic Sisters and African Americans on Chicago's South Side,” *Journal of Women's History* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 4-23; Amy Koehlinger, “From Selma to Sisterhood: Race and Transformation in Catholic Sisterhoods in the 1960s,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2002); and Gregory Nelson Hite, “The Hottest Place in Hell: The Catholic Church, the Alabama Voting Rights Campaign, and Selma, Alabama,

The civil rights and women's movements made up only a few of the issues in which sisters became deeply involved. Sister Anne Montgomery, a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart participated in peace movements in the 1970s for which she served time in prison. During the Gulf War she spent ten days serving in a peace camp on the Iraqi border. Sisters have continued to have a strong presence regarding social justice in the twenty-first century, dedicating their efforts to such issues as immigration, health care, the death penalty, and civil rights.³³⁰

Despite the singular role nuns have played in American life, historians for the most part ignore them. American history textbooks would lead one to believe nuns and sisters never existed in the United States. Most histories of religion in America not only marginalize Catholic history, but often neglect information on women's religious orders altogether. Even volumes on Catholicism in the United States focus more on the priests, bishops, and laity in general than they do on sisters. Nuns are also conspicuously absent from women's histories. Although they were on the frontlines of much of the women's movement, feminists write them off as submissively yielding to a male-dominated hierarchy.³³¹ Being left out, however, of general American history, religious histories, and women's history begs for an explanation.

1937-1965," (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2002); for an overview of the transformation of colleges in which sisters taught, attended, or administered, see Tracy Schier and Cynthia Russett, eds. *Catholic Women's Colleges in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) and Mary J. Oates, ed. *Higher Education for Catholic Women: An Historical Anthology* (New York: Garland Press, 1987); for an account of nuns' battles with the Vatican over their pro-choice stance, see Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey with Jane O'Reilly, *No Turning Back: Two Nuns' Battle with the Vatican over Women's Right to Choose* (New York: Poseido Press, 1990).

³³⁰ Rogers, *Habits of Change*, 148, 297, 69.

³³¹ There is no mention of women religious in major U.S. history textbooks, such as Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, 3rd ed., vols. 1-2 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); James Oakes, et al., *Of the People: A History of the United States*, 2nd ed., vols. 1-2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000). In Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer's summary of all of

Only recently have scholars begun to explore the hidden lives of nuns and their communities. Two engaging monographs on sisters in early America include Emily Clark's *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (2007) and Nancy Lusignan Schultz's *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (2000). Both books offer a scholarly look at the role of sisters in American life, taking the women seriously on their own terms and placing them within historical context. Kathleen Sprows Cummings extends a comprehensive comparison of nuns with Catholic women and members of the women's movement during the early twentieth century in her recent, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (2009). Scholars have also recently become more interested in presentations of nuns in popular culture. Maurine Sabine explores this topic in her *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* (2013), as does Rebecca Sullivan in *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Culture* (2005). *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (2013) by Maureen McGuiness offers a new and useful historical overview of

American religious history, in *Religion in American Life: A Short Summary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), only two pages reference only two orders of women religious (pp. 47, 269); Mark A. Noll's even more compendious *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), includes no reference to sisters or even to Catholicism. John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003). McGreevy generally references nuns only a handful of times but does provide a brief description of the orphanage network built by nuns in the late nineteenth century (pp. 129-130). Jay P. Dolan extends more information on women religious in American life in his *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002). There is only one brief reference in a note to nuns in Linda K Kerber and Jane De Hart-Mathews' eds., *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). There is no mention in either Jeanne Boydston's, Mary Kelley's, and Anne Margolis' *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), or Sara Delamont's and Lorna Duffin's, eds., *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (New York: Barnes and Nobel Books, 1978); Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3.

sisters in America.³³² While these works reveal growing academic attention to nuns in America, there is still a large lacuna in the scholarship regarding Catholic sisters and a large disconnect between the nun of popular culture and the historical nun.

The story of sisters in America has been largely told through popular culture. To most people, nuns are caricatures displayed on greeting cards, campy movies, and toys, not real women in real life. Despite the integral role so many different women religious have played in American history, the only real life story of a nun that is likely familiar to most people the U.S. is that of Maria von Trapp. The reason for this historical amnesia is varied. Most historians ignore nuns, but Catholic sisters traditionally avoid self-promotion, making it difficult for the public to take notice of their lives and actions. More importantly, perhaps, is the long legacy of anti-Catholic and especially anti-convent sentiment in America, dating back to Maria Monk. Convent narratives from the antebellum era on left a deep impression of nuns as either childlike and naïve, masculine and tyrannical, harassed and sexually objectified, or silly and idiotic. These stereotypes repeatedly reappeared in various forms from the nineteenth century to the present. Although in recent decades fierce vitriol against nuns has waned, versions of the stereotype have permeated popular culture. *Awful Disclosures* and similar convent narratives made it easy to dismiss nuns, and this lack of serious consideration lives on.

³³² Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of A New World Society, 1727-1834* (Williamsburg: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2007); Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith*; Maurine Sabine, *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film* (New York: Fordham, 2013); Sullivan, *Visual Habits*; Maureen McGuinness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Some older historians of women religious that are not as scholarly, but still very good, include Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: pub, 1978); and George C. Stewart Jr., *Marvels of Charity: History of American Sisters and Nuns* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994).

Throughout the 1910s, *The Menace*, a Missouri-based publishing house, saw to it that Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* stayed in print. It advertised the work as "one of the most formidable books ever published," claiming it revealed "what takes place when Rome locks out the state and the helpless in her papal prisons." Not mentioning any of the controversy surrounding the veracity of Monk's book or background, *The Menace* took for granted her status as "one who escaped from a nunnery." The publishers operated a newspaper, also titled *The Menace*. Sounding much like earlier anti-Catholic and nativist papers, such as *The Downfall of Babylon* and *The Protestant Vindicator*, which both originally promoted Maria Monk, *The Menace* filled pages with vitriolic anti-Catholicism couched within hyper-patriotism. The paper claimed a role in initiating "the greatest revival of patriotism the nation has known for more than a generation," referred to their readers as "Patriots," and pledged loyalty to the Constitution and the Bible. Like nineteenth century nativists, *Menace* affiliates championed the formation of a variety of secret patriotic societies, including the "Guardians of Liberty," the "Knights of Luther," and the "American Federation of Patriotic Voters."³³³ Indeed it would seem as if antebellum nativism had been reborn.

In the 1920s and 30s, a revived Ku Klux Klan took up the banner of anti-Catholicism and prejudice against convent life. The revived Klan proclaimed its objective to "remain until the last son of a Protestant surrenders his manhood, and is content to see America, Catholicized, mongrelized, and circumcised." Members vowed to protect America's women from Jews, African Americans, and Catholics and relished in graphic

³³³ "Three Books for the Price of One" (advertisement), *The Menace* (Aurora, MO) (December 28, 1918), 2.; "Our New American Patriotic Orders: Being a Little Boost, a Little Advice, and a Little Straight Talk for All of Them," *The Menace* (July 31, 1915); "All Patriots Must Rally to Rescue Our Schools," and "This is the Remedy for Romanists," *The Menace* (November 27, 1915).

stories of capture, enslavement, and torture of Protestant girls in convents. Klansmen and women sponsored a series of lectures delivered by Helen Jackson, an alleged “escaped nun” and author of *Convent Cruelties, or, My Life in a Convent* (1919). Jackson, yet another reincarnation of Maria Monk, regaled listeners with stories of infanticide, illicit relationships among nuns and priests, and gruesome punishments.³³⁴

Like the Klan coupling opposition to Catholicism with Protestantism and patriotism, The Protestant Book House, a publisher through the 1910s and 1920s, also published a series of “Tracts” denouncing Catholicism and convents. “Tract No. 8” announced “Catholic Girl Rescued from Roman Convent.” With the help of “a lawyer, the Ku Klux Klan, the Editor of the True American, and other loyal Protestants,” the girl escaped “papal slavery.” Under the title “Know the Truth: Open the Nunneries,” the Protestant Book House promoted a series of convent narratives in a pamphlet from that of Margaret Shepherd to Maria Monk. “A convent is far from being what an American institution should be,” argued the pamphlet, “holding as each and everyone does many girls behind iron doors, shut away from parents, friends and homes.” Linking the founding of British America and the ideals of the republic to anti-Catholicism, the pamphlet read further, “Liberty and escape from papal persecution caused the Pilgrims to set sail in the Mayflower and yet Romish institutions followed fast after them.” It was the readers’ duty as American Protestants to oppose convents.³³⁵

³³⁴ Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 44; Exalted Cyclops of the Order, “Principles and Purposes of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Papers Read at the Meeting of the Grand Dragons, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, at Their First Meeting Held in Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923*, in Gerald N. Grob, ed., *Anti-Movements in America* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 125; Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 148-152; Helen Jackson, *Convent Cruelties, or, My Life in a Convent* (Detroit: n.p., 1919); Jackson’s book was also published in Toledo, Ohio, home of the “Protestant Book House,” in 1924.

³³⁵ “Nunneries Must Be Abolished from American Soil,” Tract No. 40, Protestant Book House (Toledo, OH, n.y.), located in the Anti-Catholic Printed Material Collection, box 5, folder 1, University of Notre

Stories of brutality and sexual abuse within convents also continued. The Protestant Book House described Maria Monk's book as "a blood-curdling experience of a nun" that reveals "how the Romish clergy perpetuate every crime from seduction to murder." One of their tracts featuring a forlorn looking woman with her hands clutched under her chin and a tear on her cheek, informed readers that Barbara Ubrick remained locked in a "stone dungeon" for twenty-one years because "she refused to surrender her virtue to a Romish priest." Another, whose title harkened back to Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*, "My Life in the Convent: Six Years Behind Popish Nunnery Bars," told of a woman who "was the daughter of a priest of Rome—seduced by a priest—married to a priest—abandoned in a convent by a priest—her baby destroyed in a convent." Like nineteenth century narratives, those in the 1920s also continued accusing convent inmates of "smothering infants." Comparisons to convents as "sweat houses," like earlier comparisons to slavery, made convents appear especially brutal as Americans were becoming more familiarized with the oppressive factory system.³³⁶

The height of the Klan's anti-Catholicism came with members' successful opposition to presidential candidate and Catholic, Al Smith. Smith's defeat, however, signaled a dissipation of ramped hostility toward Catholics in American public. The following decades saw the entrance of many Catholics into the American religious mainstream due to years of education, the uniting forces of World War II, and greater available economic prosperity. Yet in the postwar era, anti-Catholicism heated up once

Dame Archives, Notre Dame, Ind.; "Catalogue of Anti-Papal Books," (Toledo: Protestant Book House, 1925).

³³⁶ "Convent Horror," Tract No. 40, Protestant Book House (Toledo, OH), University of Notre Dame Archives; "My Life in The Convent," Tract No. 40, Protestant Book House; "Black Convent Slave," excerpt in "Catalogue of Anti-Papal Books," (1925).

more among those who associated Catholicism with authoritarian regimes. In 1949 the Beacon Press published the most famous anti-Catholic work of the twentieth century: Paul Blanshard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, which described Soviet Communism and Catholicism as twin evils that threatened America. Blanshard promoted "candid discussion" about what he called the "Catholic problem." Catholicism "is political," he argued, pointing to efforts of bishops to secure tax dollars for parochial schools or to ban the public mailing of birth control literature. This problem was thus not religious but "an institutional and political problem" as Catholicism infringed on the institutions and politics of the U.S. Not leaving out nuns, Blanshard described sisters as being part of "an age when women allegedly enjoyed subjection and reveled in self-abasement." The book apparently resonated with American readers, as it remained on the New York Times best-seller list for seven months and quickly ran through eleven printings in its first year.³³⁷

John Dewey hailed Blanshard's book for its "great judgment and tact." Blanshard received similar praise from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Bertrand Russell, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Albert Einstein. Unsurprisingly, Catholics expressed outrage over the book, many publishing rejoinders, such as Dale Francis's *American Freedom and Paul Blanshard*. John Courtney Murray, leading Catholic theologian of the time, argued that Blanshard's work was nothing more than "New Nativism." While it lacked the "ranting, red-faced" character of nineteenth century nativism, it achieved the same "closure of mind and edge of antagonism." Despite these dismissive comments, Murray continued to

³³⁷ Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 3, 43-4, 67; Massa, *Anti-Catholicism*, 59; Blanshard, *Personal and Controversial: An Autobiography by Paul Blanshard*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 195; see also McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, ch. 6.

grapple with Blanshard's position. He read in Blanshard and others a misunderstanding of the religious clauses of the First Amendment. Believing that all religious groups should be organized democratically, Blanshard et al. imbibed the clauses with "religious content," according to Murray. The real issue rested on different opinions as to the most compatible religious organization with American democracy, but the First Amendment offered no such evaluation.³³⁸

Suspicion of nuns and convent life resurfaced along with the renewal of anti-Catholicism in the postwar era, though mostly advanced by small Protestant publishing houses and organizations. "The Book and Bible House" of Decatur, Georgia took up the torch in reprinting *Awful Disclosures* in 1952. The publishers boasted that "this is the most extensively read book ever printed on the papal curse" and that "Rome fought bitterly but in vain to suppress it." They harkened back to previous editions, including those printed by the Menace and estimated that "10,000,000 copies have been read throughout the world." Once again, Maria Monk gained status as promoters presented the nun as threatening to family values and the nuclear family. The Book and Bible House juxtaposed the nun's life with domestic norms, stating "Rome teaches...that the nun is holier in the sight of God than a loving lawful mother with a child in her thrilled and thrilling arms; that a priest is better than a loving father; that celibacy is better than that passion of love that has made everything of beauty in this world."³³⁹

³³⁸ Dewey's praise for Blanshard's book appeared on the dust jacket of its third printing; Blanshard describes the support he received from others in *Personal and Controversial*, 194; Dale Francis, *American Freedom and Paul Blanshard* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1950); John Courtney Murray, "Paul Blanshard and the New Nativism," *The Month* 191 (1951): 214-25; see also, Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1960).

³³⁹ "Maria Monk," Tract and Book Ad Combined, Tract No. 27, 1952 Series (Decatur, Ga.: Book and Bible House, 1952), Courtesy of the University of Notre Dame Archives.

Like taglines to Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* and other antebellum convent narratives, the alleged exposés of the mid-twentieth century promised to reveal the most shocking secrets yet. "Nothing like this ever published in America," read a description to "House of Death and Gate of Hell or Convent Brutality," from a 1952 tract by the Book and Bible House. "Horrible and blood-curdling revelations of convent life for the last twenty years—Poison, Murder, Rapine, Torturing and smothering babies. The book is already stirring the nation... If you want to know what goes on behind convent walls, read this book." The books and pamphlets freely borrowed from earlier convent narratives. As in *Awful Disclosures*, "House of Death," told of a nun being made to drink the water from which the mother superior washed her feet and another being "bound hand and foot, gagged, lying in a dungeon." Like a carnival line-up of oddities, "House of Death," invited readers to "see" the nun who "dug a whole under wall and made escape from Detroit nunnery," "see photo of nun shot by a Roman thug," "see priest and mother superior smothering a baby" in Montreal, Canada, "see nun who struck priest with an ax when he attacked her," and "see the iron virgin with steel teeth, a murder device." Beauty remained an issue as well. Just as in antebellum narratives, made more dramatic by the entrance of a beautiful woman into a convent, later literature lamented the "waste" of attractive women who became nuns. "Almost a Nun!" read the cover of a 1950s tract featuring the mug shot of an attractive woman.³⁴⁰

Hollywood picked up on the drama of the beautiful nun, but dropped the contempt in a series of films that presented the nun as an angelic figure. The first movie to feature a nun as the lead role, *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), displayed a charismatic woman, no

³⁴⁰ "House of Death and Gate of Hell, or, Convent Brutality," Tract No. 31, 1952 Series (Decatur, Ga.: Book and Bible House, 1952), Courtesy of the University of Notre Dame Archives; "Almost a Nun!" (Havertown, Pa.: The Conversion Center, c. 1950), Courtesy of the University of Notre Dame Archives.

stranger to the life of romance and culture, who nevertheless freely chose a nun's life. A story of a good-natured rivalry between Sister Benedict, played by the lovely Ingrid Bergman, and Father O'Malley, played by Bing Crosby, unfolds through the film. Despite their differences, the two learn to work together to save their inner city school from being shut down. *New York Times* reviewer, Bosley Crowther wrote that Bergman's performance stereotyped the nun as the "good sister" and Bergman as the "Virgin Mary of films." Audiences enjoyed the film, helping it take in \$21,300,000 and become among the highest grossing of the time. It presented a "feel good" story with affable and attractive lead characters, tensions of chaste romance, and a message of giving and hope.³⁴¹ While the film offered a needed antidote to the legacy of convent propaganda, it was not necessarily more realistic in its portrayal of the nun, presenting a Hollywood ideal rather than a human depiction.

Other postwar era films seemed to suggest it was finally okay to be American and Catholic, a citizen and a nun. Released in 1959, the same year as *Ben Hur*, *The Nun's Story*, starring Audrey Hepburn, became an instant success. Based on a true account and best-selling book, *The Nun's Story* traced Gabrielle Van Der Mal, the daughter of a wealthy Belgian surgeon, into a convent where she became Sister Luke. As part of a missionary order, the mother superior of the convent sends Sister Luke to assist doctors in the Belgian Congo. Despite having strong convictions to serve, Sister Luke struggles with her pride and independence during her time in the order only to find herself later

³⁴¹ *The Bells of St. Mary's*, Directed by Leo McCarey, Rainbow Productions Inc., 1945; Sabine, *Veiled Desires*, 29-31; Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," *New York Times* (December 7, 1945): 26; Mary Gordon, "Father Chuck: A Reading of *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary's*, or Why Priests Make Us Crazy," *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 93 no.3 (1994), 592; see also Anthony Burke Smith, *The Look of Catholics: Portrayals in Popular Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010).

falling in love with Dr. Fortunati, an agnostic surgeon. While nothing comes of their growing affection for each other, Sister Luke continues to struggle with the austerities of convent life. Finally, after her father's death, hastened by the Nazi capture of Belgium, she decides to leave the convent.³⁴²

A Nun's Story received high reviews by Catholics and the secular press, alike. The *Hollywood Reporter* stated "the picture leaves no doubt that the life of the dedicated nun is courageous and filled with self-sacrificing service." *America*, a Jesuit-run Catholic magazine, praised the film for its depiction of "devotion to Christ and His work." Some sisters, however, felt frustrated with the film's portrayal of convent life as "an imposing asylum," a presentation which they felt would harm their efforts to recruit new postulants. A Notre Dame Sister who sat on the panel for the film, complained that it reduced religious life to "a series of lectures and processions and exhortations." Indeed the film presented exaggerated convent austerities for dramatic effect. Despite its shortcomings, the film was one of the first to take seriously the life the nun in a way that was neither dumbed-down nor anti-Catholic. Although Sister Luke left the convent, she did not have to run away; she faced no resistance; and her decision to join and to leave were both truly her own. Historian Rebecca Sullivan contends this film was an "ambitious, serious minded, and controversial attempt" to present the story of one nun.³⁴³

Moving out of the postwar era but continuing in the same vein as previous films, the most famous of all "nun movies," *The Sound of Music*, began as a hit musical by

³⁴² *The Nun's Story*, directed by Fred Zimmermann, Warner Brothers, 1959; Sullivan, *Visual Habits*, 101-102.

³⁴³ Sullivan, *Visual Habits*, 119; Harold C. Gardiner, "Story on *The Nun's Story*," *America* (Dec. 8, 1956): 300-1; for the Notre Dame Sister's response and the response of other sisters to the film, see Gardiner, "'The Nun's Story'—A Symposium," *America* (June 27, 1959): 468-71; Sullivan, 103, 98, 105, 115, 4.

Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein. *The Sound of Music* told the story of a good-hearted novice, Maria, who after taking an assignment to serve as governess over seven children at the behest of a wealthy Austrian widower, finds herself falling in love with him and embroiled in the family's attempts to escape Nazi rule. Rather than running away from the convent to wed Captain von Trapp, the mother superior convinces Maria to leave the order with her blessing. The musical ran from November 1959 to June 1963 before Robert Wise produced the film version in 1965. Rogers and Hammerstein approached the life of the nun with seriousness and respect, consulting with Sister Gregory Duff, O.P., a Dominican Sister, to ensure a realistic representation of convent life. His efforts proved successful. The film version grossed over \$60 million in the first year and later received an Oscar for Best Picture.³⁴⁴

Although the film actively avoided stereotypes of nuns, its popularity derived more from its charismatic and uplifting portrayals of family life, romance, and adventure. Wise argued for the serendipitous timing of the film. As the U.S. began its war in Vietnam and felt the first waves of a cultural revolution, people longed for “old fashioned ideals” and escape. “Besides an outstanding score and an excellent cast, it has a heartwarming story, good humor, someone to love and someone to hate, and seven adorable children,” argued one reviewer. Maria embodied gender ideals of the age, being pure, chaste, innocent, and highly deferential, first as a novice and then as a devoted wife. Pauline Kael of *McCalls* criticized Maria's character for being “inhumanly happy...[with] a mind as clean and well-brushed as her teeth.” Like other postwar era

³⁴⁴ *The Sound of Music*, Directed by Robert Wise, Twentieth Century Fox, 1965; Sullivan, 163-164, 85.

films about nuns, *The Sound of Music* avoided the cliché of the imprisoned nun, yet relished in a portrayal of an idealized nun.³⁴⁵

While postwar era films suggested a final peace among Protestants and Catholics in America, reminiscent of Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955) thesis, the presidential campaign of 1960 brought anti-Catholic anxieties back to the surface in American life. On September 8, 1960, the *New York Times* front page offered an "official statement" regarding the problem with John F. Kennedy's religion in his bid for the presidency. The statement, put forward by the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom or the Peale Group, compared Kennedy's promises to uphold the separation of church and state with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's alleged commitment to peace, claiming "Rome was little better than Moscow." Norman Vincent Peale had gathered over one hundred evangelicals and conservative Protestants the day before to discuss the candidacy of Kennedy, where attendees put together the statement. Like earlier portrayals of convents as authoritarian and oppressive, the Peale Group warned that Kennedy's influence could bring an end to certain American freedoms. The article received almost immediate reproof not only from Catholics, but from Protestants and Jews as well, forcing Peale to backtrack from the statement. Protestant theologians, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr—reversing an earlier view at least by Niebuhr—both

³⁴⁵ Sabine, 164; Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3-5; see also Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Conclusion: Religion, Film, and Cultural Analysis," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, eds. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 152-9; Pauline Kael, "The Sound of... *The Sound of Music* and *The Singing Nun*," in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), 176-8 ; Sullivan, 80-5.

publically denounced the Peale Group's manifesto, arguing it amounted to religious bigotry.³⁴⁶

The religion question, however, haunted Kennedy throughout his campaign. The senator from Massachusetts worked tirelessly to assure voters of his belief in the separation of church and state and that he would make decisions as president in accordance with his "conscience...without regard to outside religious pressure." Perhaps most memorable in determining the religion question was Kennedy's statement, "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens to be a Catholic. I do not speak for the Catholic Church on issues of public policy, and no one in that Church speaks for me." Kennedy's "theologically thin" answer helped ensure the privatization of religion in politics—something many in Peale's camp would later bemoan. His election also represented the integration of Catholics into American society.³⁴⁷

Perhaps as a last-stitch effort to battle Romanism, a string of *Awful Disclosures* reprints and editions—each more salacious than the next—appeared through the 1960s to the 1990s. Some of the book covers pictured Monk as an attractive veiled woman with red lips and black eyeliner. Others lured readers with more tawdry covers, such as one which showed Monk clad in a torn habit that revealed the crest of a nipple. In 1969,

³⁴⁶ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Peter Braestrup, "Protestant Group Wary on Kennedy: Statement by Peale Group Sees Vatican 'Pressure' on Democratic Nominee," *New York Times* (September 8, 1960); Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 77-80; "Bennett and Niebuhr Repudiate Religious attack on Kennedy Candidacy," press release, box 1018, John F. Kennedy Presidential Pre-Presidential Papers, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library, cited in McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 213.

³⁴⁷ Massa, 81-3; John F. Kennedy, "On Church and State," in *The Kennedy Reader*, ed. Jay David (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 363-4; Kennedy, "The Responsibility of the Press: Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Washington D.C., April 12, 1960," in "*Let the Word Go Forth*": *The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, ed. Theodore Sorensen (New York: Delacorte Press, 1988), 126-8; see also Jay Dolan, *In Search of American Catholicism*, 191-2;

Canova Press in London, published an edition of *Awful Disclosures* sure to attract interest. The cover pictured a naked nun, bent over in preparation for a priest to whip her. In addition to Monk's story, the work included "an account of the sexual crimes of Father Girard against Catherine Cadiere, the passive victim of his sadistic lusts." An introduction noted that Monk's text was taken from "a very early edition by T. B. Peterson of Philadelphia [published in 1836], and is thus quite authentic." Reflecting the egalitarian impulses of the late 1960s, the introduction described *Awful Disclosures* as a work which proved "that all men are equal, that even the good are not always beyond reproach." Like earlier commentary, the Canova edition hailed the enduring popularity of Maria Monk. "Each succeeding generation has read her account of evil practices within the nunnery walls with excitement and absorbed interest, with the result that Maria Monk and her book have passed into the annals of literary legend." This persistent interest, the author argued further, "proves conclusively and again that truth is stranger and more enduring than fiction."³⁴⁸

The 1969 version of *Awful Disclosures* introduced the book as something that shocked its first readers. The author of the introduction praised Monk for her "considerable courage" in publishing the work, assuming that she received no support. Presenting Maria Monk as a lone avenger of truth as opposed to a pawn in the hands of money-grubbing nineteenth century publishers, made for a very different history. The introduction continued, detailing the "torrent of abuse" Monk faced for the publication of *Awful Disclosures*. "Condemnation and refutation...raged in the press but the truth contained in this explosive book was unquestionably confirmed." The introduction failed

³⁴⁸ Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (London: Canova Press, 1969).

to mention the subsequent investigations of the Hotel Dieu and condemnation of Monk's story issued by a variety of sources—Catholic and otherwise. Instead the introduction notes that Monk “was able to corroborate her claims by producing reliable witnesses.” Not mentioning Monk's own mother's condemnation of *Awful Disclosures*, the introduction concluded, “This show of good faith effectively prevented the detractors from taking the matter further, and, over the years, Monk's story has been freed from any suggestion of untruth.” Revealing the staying power of the deviant sexual content of *Awful Disclosures*, in 1997, Senate, an imprint of Random House reissued the 1969 edition with a similarly intriguing cover, of a woman wearing nothing more than a nun's headdress. Both London editions became available in the U.S.³⁴⁹

By the late 1960s on into the 1970s, the image of the nun became solidified between opposite poles of childlike innocence and vixen deviance. While more salacious portrayals of nuns appeared in reprints of *Awful Disclosures*, the mainstream media stuck to more innocent and benign portrayals. No one embodied the childlike nun more than *The Flying Nun*, a television show which aired from 1967 to 1970 on ABC. Shortly after her debut as “Gidget,” the “ultimate perky teenager,” Sally Field played part of Sister Bertrille, a similarly perky, young, virginal, and kindhearted nun. Bertrille's petite frame and large winged coronet enabled her “fly” in the missionary outpost's windy city of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Like other popular sitcoms from the time, *The Flying Nun* presented small disturbances to everyday life that were neatly resolved within the course of the show's half hour time slot. Like its contemporary *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, the show starred a female in possession of some alien force who nevertheless chose a life of

³⁴⁹ “Introduction” in Monk, *Awful Disclosures*, xii; Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk: The Hidden Secrets of Convent Life, Together with The Cardiere Case* (1969; repr., London: Random House, 1997).

containment, be it in the suburban household or the convent. In the midst of the women's movement and radical changes within women's religious orders at the time, *The Flying Nun*, represented traditional religious life and controlled female independence. Like nineteenth century portrayals of nuns, it presented sisters as naive and youthful. The sitcom-ification of convent life initiated by *The Flying Nun*, furthermore, served as a harbinger for the later embedding of the nun in kitsch culture and light entertainment.³⁵⁰

The childlike "flying" nun contrasted sharply with the hyper-sexual vixen nun, which emerged beyond *Awful Disclosures* editions and marginal convent narratives into film by the 1970s. Like portrayals of convent life in the antebellum era that merged sexuality with Gothic imagery, 1970s' sexy nuns were also scary. *The Devils* (1971), directed by Ken Russell, unfolded a dramatized and embellished account of a degenerate seventeenth century priest, Urbain Grandier, and the drama that surrounded his execution for witchcraft in Loudun, France. Vanessa Redgrave starred as a sexually repressed nun, obsessed with Grandier, played by Oliver Reed. After being rebuffed by Grandier who was already engaged in an affair of his own, Redgrave's character seeks revenge by accusing him of witchcraft and of possessing her and the other nuns of the convent. Clergy members subsequently arrive to perform a mass exorcism, forcing the women to remove all of their clothes. The exorcism devolves into an orgy during which some of the nuns sexually desecrate a statue of Christ. In the end Grandier faces tortures akin to the Inquisition before being burned at the stake. When *The Devils* came out, it received an

³⁵⁰ *The Flying Nun* (1967-70), ABC Television; Sullivan, "Gidget Joins a Convent: Television Confronts the New Nuns," in Sullivan, *Visual Habits*, 190-213.

“X” rating for disturbing violent and sexual content and was banned in several countries.³⁵¹

Flavia the Rebel Nun (1974), an Italian film that became popular in the U.S., adopted a similar refrain and could be classified as an almost complete adaptation from nineteenth century convent narratives. The film featured a young girl sent to a convent in thirteenth century Portugal. There she suffers unmentionable horrors of torture, whippings, and rape before finally escaping. As a freed woman, she takes a Muslim lover who had devoted his life to castrating rapists. *The Devils* and *Flavia the Rebel Nun* came out alongside a series of other movies that capitalized on Catholic-horror, or what historian Victoria Nelson calls “faux Catholicism,” including *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976). Each of these films relied on Gothic imagery, the supernatural, and a presentation of Catholicism more fantastical than real to present a haunting narrative. Such “faux Catholicism” was nothing new, as convent literature had for over a century drawn on horror and salacious depictions of Catholicism and the nun’s life.³⁵²

The 1970s also saw some of the first satires of nuns in popular films. The most popular, *Nasty Habits* (1975) released alongside other parody hits such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), came from British producers. In *Nasty Habits* two Philadelphia nuns waged a Watergate-like competition—complete with break-ins, wire-tapping, and bribery—for the position of head abbess. In an effort to beat the competition, Sister Alexandra, played by Glenda Jackson, and her allies break into the sewing box of her competition. There they find illicit love letters

³⁵¹ *The Devils*, directed by Ken Russell, Warner Bros., 1971; *The Devils* was based on Aldous Huxley’s *The Devils* (1952, repr.; New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

³⁵² *Flavia the Rebel Nun*, directed by Gianfranco Mingozzi, 1974; Victoria Nelson, “Faux Catholic: A Gothic Subgenre from Monk Lewis to Dan Brown,” *Boundary 2* 34, no. 3 (2007): 87-107.

from the sister's secret lover. A ridiculous and comical battle ensues, including the nuns duking it out on the football field and hiding a transmitter in the belly of the baby Jesus statue.³⁵³ This satirical approach to nuns initiated a long tradition of kitsch nun culture in America that still lives on today.

Nun satire boomed throughout the 1980s and continues today in the figures of ugly, old, funny, goofy, stern, masculine, and what Mary Ann Janosik calls “crazy aunt” nuns. Most often these satiric nuns are teachers who hold ruler in hand ready to strike at the slightest hint of insubordination. This old crone nun opposes any and all modes of fun, amusement, or frivolity, and appears to have spent a lifetime denying herself such fineries. She appeared famously in the 1980 smash hit, *The Blues Brothers*. When Jake and Elwood embark on their mission from God to save the Catholic home in which they were raised, they stop to see their old school teacher, a stern nun. The sister, or “the Penguin,”—so called for her black and white full habit—enjoins the men to sit in small school desks as she bemoans the school's costly bills. When the brothers offer to give her the funds, she refuses their “filthy, stolen money.” Jake's retort that she's “up a shit creek,” invokes a barrage of beatings from the nun with a yard stick. The beating spree sends the brothers tumbling down the stairs, still stuck in their desk seats, as the nun intones after them that they've “turned into two thieves with filthy mouths and bad attitudes.”³⁵⁴ The *Blues Brothers*' nun stands for the quintessential nun figure today. Although most sisters are no longer teachers, the image of the angry school sister—often comic in its rendering—remains ubiquitous.

³⁵³ *Nasty Habits*, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Bowden Productions Limited, 1977.

³⁵⁴ Mary Ann Janosik, “Madonnas in Our Midst: Representations of Women Religious in Hollywood Film,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 75-98; *The Blues Brothers*, directed by John Landis, Universal Pictures, 1980.

Five years later, the silly teacher nun—always fully habited—appeared in the famous musical production “Nunsense.” What began as a series of greeting cards developed into a cabaret and then a full musical. After its debut, “Nunsense” became the second longest running Off-Broadway show in history. In the first act of the show a group of around fifty habited nuns gather around the table for a meal. After a prayer, they silently dip into their bowls, when suddenly one nun after the next drops dead, head-first domino-style into the soup. In the following act or episode, four other nuns, who had safely avoided the soup because they were “off playing bingo,” host a fundraiser to bury their sisters. Of the four, one is “Sister Amnesia,” who forgot her real name after being hit in the head with a crucifix. They run around preparing to circus music, chant Latin for a few stanzas, and then sing a Broadway-like number about their history, which they get mixed up. The sisters argue about the history of their order, revealing their ignorance, and suggest ludicrous ideas as to how they might raise money to pay the funerals of their poor, dead sisters. Since its debut, “Nunsense” became so popular that it spawned “Nunsense II,” “Nuncrackers,” “Nunsense Jamboree,” “Nunset Boulevard,” and “Nunsensations,” among other spin-offs that play in New York City and all over the country. Much like “Nunsense,” “Late Night Catechism,” another spoof on teaching nuns, is a one-woman stand-up act of a stern, somewhat ridiculous nun teacher who lectures her audience on chewing gum and showing cleavage.³⁵⁵

Funny nuns, such as those in “Nunsense” and “Late Night Catechism” are meant in jest. Real sisters often occupy seats in the audience, and both production companies regularly donate a percentage of the earnings to various communities of women religious.

³⁵⁵ “Nunsense,” Book, music, and lyrics by Dan Goggin, Off-Broadway, New York, New York, 1985-present; “Late Night Catechism,” written by Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan, Premiered at Life Bait Theater, Chicago, Ill., 1993.

They harken back to days when the majority of sisters assumed teaching roles, whether they wanted to or not. Some made good teachers, some did not. They also reflect an era when primary schools embraced stricter discipline. Yet there is something disturbing about the image advanced by these comedies. Over fifty nuns plunging to their deaths in soup makes them appear cartoon like and ridiculous. The fact that certain nuns avoided this death because they were playing bingo suggests that women religious have nothing important to do. Getting their own history wrong makes it seem as though they actually have none. Likewise, “Late Night Catechism” would make it seem that all teaching nuns only served as harping, out-of-touch babysitters. Like the benignly silly nuns in earlier convent narratives, such as those in Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, who didn’t know how to spell or believed in ghosts, the silly nun of contemporary culture presents an entertaining image of the nun that reflects the audience’s desires for comedy more than reality.

Funny, entertaining nuns perhaps became most popular with the blockbuster hits, *Sister Act* and *Sister Act II* (1992, 1993). When a nightclub performer, Deloris Van Cartier, played by Whoopi Goldberg, witnesses a mob murder, the police convince her to hide out in a convent. Predictably she has a hard time fitting in, especially with the stern mother superior, played by the best tight-lipped disciplinarian actor, Maggie Smith. After taking charge of the convent’s choir and turning them into an impressive hip-swinging, voice-belting ensemble, Goldberg’s character settles into her new role and develops friendships with many of the sisters. While *Sister Act* does not portray nuns unfavorably—even the stern mother superior eventually comes around—it capitalizes off of familiar stock nun personas. There is the uptight, cold mother superior, the old, out-of-

touch sexless nuns, a sweet, though, painfully naïve sister, and an overly friendly, zany odd-ball nun who belts random high-pitched soprano notes in glass-shattering vibrato. The film is fun and entertaining. And any one of many of the scenes, including one where the zany sister break dances with kids on the streets, or another where a flock of nuns run throughout a casino in Reno, could have inspired the popular “Nuns Having Fun” franchise.³⁵⁶

The scary nun also haunts contemporary culture, usually tying together strands of sexuality and horror into one figure. Why are nuns scary? “Because they are different, different in a wholly confusing way,” claims a recent gift book entitled *Scary Nuns*. Filled with images of fully-habited nuns “at work and play,” *Scary Nuns* lists various nuns throughout history in its “Scary Nuns Hall of Fame.” Offering a snippet of history for each of its inductees, and accompanying images that often have nothing to do with the description, this book merely perpetuates the mystery of nuns and invites readers to be entertained, if not slightly spooked. One image of nuns holding an illuminated baby Jesus is accompanied by an excerpt from Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. Brontë’s 1853 novel drew on Gothic images of nuns. Set in France, the novel described a “ghostly chamber” in which the protagonist spotted, or dreamed, “in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN.” Following suit from this nineteenth century work, the book contains other spooky pictures of nuns, including one of Carmelite nuns holding a funeral mass in France in 1940, their veiled faces illuminated by candle glow. Another displays the corpse of a Carmelite nun in Spain who was killed during the Spanish Civil War. There’s a nun watching children sleep in an orphanage in Havana, Cuba, and even a fold out

³⁵⁶ *Sister Act*, Directed by Emile Ardolino, Touchstone Pictures, 1992.

image of a nun whose tall coronet opens up into a horn-like centerpiece.³⁵⁷ These images are funny; they're scary; and they do nothing to show nuns as real human beings.

American Horror Story (2011) a miniseries devoted to revamping archetypes in the American horror tradition, presented some of the scariest—if not also stereotypical—nuns. Season two features an insane asylum in the 1960s run by nuns who deliver all sorts of malpractice and abuse on their patients. Sister Jude, played by Jessica Lang, embodies a severe, cold, judgmental, and intimidating nun who runs the ward. Predictably, Sr. Jude doesn't really help her patients. "Mental illness is a fashionable explanation for sin!" she intones before calling her patients "monsters" and using electric shock therapy to "cure" them of homosexuality and other "vices." Jude's face stares down menacingly as she watches with glee as her patients writhe and wriggle under the torture.³⁵⁸

Sr. Jude also harbors pent up sexual desire and a secret crush on the monsignor, co-founder of the facility. She dons a red negligee under her habit in the event that he propositions her, about which she frequently fantasizes. Aware of her interest, though not sharing it, the priest plays on the sister's ambitions to get her approval for various questionable treatments. When I'm cardinal one day, he tells her, you will be mother superior. Her face shines when he promises, "thousands of nuns...will address you as *Reverend Mother*." Like convent narratives from the early nineteenth century, the show is

³⁵⁷ N.a., *Scary Nuns: Sisters at Work and Play* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2007); Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, (1853).

³⁵⁸ *American Horror Story: Asylum*, Season 2, American FX, 2012-2013.

full of vainly ambitious nuns, subterranean passages, references to torture from the Middle Ages, actual torture, lust, and horror.³⁵⁹

Sister Eunice, a kind though idiotic nun who lives in deathly fear of Sister Jude, becomes possessed by a demon in one episode when an exorcism goes awry in the asylum. In her veiled habit, the unassuming Sr. Eunice sadistically carries out a series of murders. Her previously innocent temperament and full habit make her actions all the more frightening. The doctor, played by James Cromwell, whose medical experiments transform his patients into animal-like predators, displays morbid fascination with the nun-whore figure, as he demands a prostitute dress up as a nun and later puts lipstick on a looming and ominous Madonna statue before calling her a whore and shattering the image on the floor.³⁶⁰ Tying together the nun-as-whore and the scary nun in one season, “American Horror Story” borders on misogyny and does well in keeping alive old stereotypes.

The fear of nuns has led some on a quest to demystify the veiled sisterhood. Cheryl L. Reed, a journalist with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, traveled the country interviewing and living among different orders of women religious. What began as a series of articles by Reed turned into a book, entitled *Unveiled: The Hidden Lives of Nuns* (2004). Initially skeptical—Reed writes that she grew up “afraid of nuns”—she discovered a lasting friendship with many of the women, who opened up to her. Far from being stuffy, subdued, and sulking, Reed wrote that “these women are living the ultimate feminist lives.” Rather than seeing women religious as effusively submissive, Reed perceived them as “embracing a radical way of life, a rebellion to societal constraints and

³⁵⁹ *American Horror Story*, Season 2, episodes 1-3.

³⁶⁰ *American Horror Story*, Season 2, episodes 1-3.

demands.” In contrast to one-dimensional presentations of nuns, Reed wrote of the women of one order, “I hadn’t anticipated that St. Benedict’s sisters would be animated or quizzical or *human*.”³⁶¹

Reed spent time interviewing the Visitine Sisters who run an inner-city ministry in an impoverished town in Minneapolis. The sisters opened their minister after years of planning. They admitted to Reed, however, that they had no special training. “We don’t have any know-how to do any good stuff in the neighborhood. Our main thing is to be in relationships with these people and to be friends...people meet here and get connected.” Far from being sheltered or cut off, these women received constant visitors and phone calls and associated with people on drugs and probation from jail. Nor were the women lofty saints, as the sisters assured Reed that they “are no different from families; they argue, they fight, and sometimes they let little things get on their nerves.” In interviewing one of the sisters, Reed discovered that Suzanne Homeyer joined at the age of 45 after a long career of peace activism and political involvement as a city council representative. “I had a great sense of how a neighborhood can be a functioning, life-giving place,” explained Homeyer. “In a lot of ways, that’s why I came here.” Other women entered at different ages and for different reasons. No one story was the same. Reed’s small snapshot of one community revealed a dynamic role played by Catholic sisters, one that looks quite different from contemporary and earlier stereotypes.³⁶²

Some recent films and television series have also embarked on presenting a more realistic portrayal of nuns, with *Dead Man Walking* being perhaps the most famous.

³⁶¹ Cheryl L. Reed, *Unveiled: The Hidden Lives of Nuns* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2004), xvi, 23-4; for another contemporary effort to demystify the life of sisters, see Jane Christmas, *And Then There Were Nuns* (Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2013) about one woman’s year-long experience in four convents.

³⁶² Reed, *Unveiled: The Hidden Lives of Nuns*, 35, 39, 42.

Based on a true story, Susan Sarandon stars as Sister Helen Prejean, a nun who befriends Matthew Poncelet, a murderer and rapist on death row. Despite any initial revulsion she feels toward Poncelet and her inexperience as a criminal chaplain, Prejean commits to helping him, even if that only means being a friend. She connects Poncelet with a lawyer and becomes his spiritual councilor. When his appeal is denied, Prejean continues to visit Poncelet, lending a listening ear, meeting his family and the family of his victims, helping him come to terms with his responsibility, and sticking by his side in his final hours. Whereas murders and nuns usually appear as black and white figures, both Poncelet and Prejean are dynamic and complicated, making this a stirring and thought-provoking film.³⁶³

Dead Man Walking received praise for its realistic portrayal of religious life. “Finally a filmic depiction of a nun that is grounded in human emotion,” wrote Patricia Kowal in a review for *Magill’s Cinema Annual*. Commenting on her role in the film, Sarandon stated she had “never seen a nun on screen who’s been a real person.” Although *Dead Man Walking* is a type of love story between Sister Helen and Poncelet, it’s not one of sexual attraction. Sister Helen struggles to love the unlovable Poncelet. As she fights a natural aversion to him, she fosters what might be called unconditional love. This surprises and touches Poncelet, who simply says to her in his last hours, “Thank you for loving me.” Tim Robbins, the film director, stated it “was not a typical love story... The stakes are much higher.” Indeed the stakes were higher for Sister Helen who invoked the disdain of Poncelet’s victims’ families, and for Poncelet who risked feeling deep emotions at time when it could have been much easier for him to be calloused and steeled

³⁶³ *Dead Man Walking*, directed by Tim Robbins, Polygram Film Entertainment, 1995. The film, is based on Helen Prejean’s memoir, *Dead Man Walking: An Eye Witness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

off. Perhaps that's what make the film and the story itself so compelling. While not projecting an angelic nun or a straight forward plot, *Dead Man Walking* nevertheless captured something of the sacred.³⁶⁴

The HBO series *OZ* (1997-2003), also broke away from common nun stereotypes. Sister Pete, played by Rita Moreno Banksy, who starred as Anita in the 1961 film, *West Side Story*, is no naïve waif. She has to be tough, unafraid, and passionate to work in one of the hardest penitentiaries, known as the “Emerald City”—or “Oz” by its inmates—for its innovative approach to punishing criminals. When despairing inmates confide in Sr. Pete, she offers no canned answers or condescending remarks; and when's she not sure what to say, says nothing, rather offering a listening ear. Nor is Sr. Pete rigidly conservative, as many nun stereotypes appear. When one inmate is sentenced to death row by a governor eager to demonstrate an enactment of justice to please his constituents, the sister calls attention to hidden motives. “[He] is the first to die because he's black and he's young. The public is not going to feel safe if we execute a seventy-year-old white guy.” She risks her job to protest against the death penalty, standing up against her male boss. She embraces the not-as-popular, although still realistic position for some sisters, when she voices her opposition to abortion as well. Holding her own among male inmates and male hierarchies of the justice world alike, Sr. Pete reveals a grittier side of America's many sisters who work in the inner city and dedicate themselves to social justice issues.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Patricia Kowal, Review of *Dead Man Walking*, *Magill's Cinema Annual 1996: A Survey of Films of 1995*, ed. Beth A. Phaner and Christopher B. Scanlon (Detroit, Mich.: Gale, 1996), 125-7; Rachel Abramowitz, “Mother Superior: Interview with Susan Sarandon,” *Premier* 9, no. 5 (1996), 56; Sabin, 254-5

³⁶⁵ *Oz*, Season 1, Episodes 1-3, Television Series, HBO (1997-2003).

The most overt efforts to demystify nuns is a recent documentary film narrated by Susan Sarandon, titled “A Question of Habit”. The film opens to the background music from the famed “singing nun,” whose short-lived singing career seemed buoyed more by the novelty of a singing nun than genuine interest. As the credits flash on the screen, wind-up nun dolls march by and heads of bobble-head nuns bounce, and various figurines from bowling nuns to nuns with duck bills appear. Interviewing a variety of women religious, including Helen Prejean, on whom the film *Dead Man Walking* is based, the film producers attempted to capture the real lives of sisters. One sister, Anna Ida Gannon, BVM, (Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary) describes the satirical approach to the nun in popular culture as “highly offensive.” Cartoon characters cover over a lifetime of work and dedication, she claimed. Scholars of women religious also appear on the film, assessing the current cultural understanding of nuns and the various portrayals of sisters in popular culture in American history. Although the film has not been released to the general public, it marks a genuine interest in uncovering the life of the nun, of taking sisters seriously and understanding them on their own terms, something due to any and every historical subject.³⁶⁶

Some self-identified feminists are also taking a new look at nuns. The highly feminist and visible web-based magazine, “Jezebel,” recently ran an article entitled “Nuns are So Hot Right Now They’re Getting Their Own Reality Show.” After discussing the potential reality show, *The Sisterhood*, tracing the lives of five women as they consider religious vows, “Jezebel” went on to analyze current interest in nuns. “Are nuns the NEXT BIG THING? Are nuns the new witches? Like how witches are the new

³⁶⁶ *A Question of Habit*, Directed by Michael Whalen, 2012.

zombies and zombies were the new vampires?” it asked. In a more ponderous tone, the writers for “Jezebel,” asked whether nuns as an institution were feminist. “Obviously Catholicism is markedly *not*,” they concluded, “but there’s something sisters-doin’-it-for-themselves about nuns.” They went on referencing nuns’ participation in anti-nuclear peace protests and nuns as “powerful role models for female friendship.”³⁶⁷ If “Jezebel,” representing the pulse of today’s feminist character, is wondering about how nuns fit into feminism, this is a sign that nuns might not always be stereotyped and dehumanized.

A surprising return to the one-dimensional nun in popular culture appeared with the 2008 release of *Doubt*. Set in 1964, *Doubt* takes place just one year after the shocking death of John F. Kennedy and untimely death of Pope John Paul XXIII. While the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) neared its close with a promise of renewal, the convent, parish, and school of *Doubt* appear thoroughly entrenched in a languishing Catholic malaise of rigid gender roles, repression, and cold regulations. The film offers a sense of foreboding as to the coming clerical sex scandals that would become known at the end of the twentieth century and serve to shake church authority, morale, finances, and global reputation to its core. In the film, Sister Aloysius, played by Meryl Streep, comes to doubt the nature of the relationship of Father Flynn, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, with the school’s lone black student, Donald Miller, played by Joseph Foster. Gothic elements run throughout the movie, with the school set in a dark, wintery, gray landscape. Children fear wind that storms outside their bedroom windows. Everyone appears lonely and isolated as Streep’s character terrifies student and faculty alike and lies in wait to catch Flynn doing something wrong. Under pressure from Streep’s character, Sister

³⁶⁷ Lindy West, “Nuns Are So Hot Right Now They’re Getting Their Own Reality Show,” *Jezebel* (April 4, 2014), <http://jezebel.com/nuns-are-so-hot-right-now-theyre-getting-their-own-real-1567201174> (Accessed July 12, 2014).

James, played by Amy Adams, feels guilty after she implicates Flynn in a scandal when she's uncertain as to the truth of her assumptions. In the end Flynn leaves, while sisters and viewers are left in "doubt" as to whether Aloysius' fears were true.³⁶⁸

Reviewers quickly criticized the one-dimensional nature of Streep's and Adam's characters. Maurine Sabine concludes the "film relies on well-worn gender contrivance of splitting the woman religious in two," with the "admired qualities of youth, beauty, kindness, compassion, and love" to Sister James and grotesque and "dangerous properties of authority" to Aloysius. In reviewing the film, the *Village Voice* wrote of Patrick Shanley's "considerable ambivalence about women" projected by these two polar opposite and stereotypical female roles.³⁶⁹ Although *Doubt* captured a feeling of uncertainty before the revelation of a wide-spread clerical sex scandal—a serious and important moment in the history of Catholicism—it did little to liberate the nun from the popular cultural stereotype in which she has been encapsulated for centuries.

Maria Monk, virtually unknown today, contributed to a cultural phenomenon much larger than herself or the immediate controversy that surrounded the publication of *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu*. Her narrative, which became the template for so many other convent narratives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and served to help propel the American campaign against convents, cast nuns as varying between virtuous victims, sex slaves, naïve children, tyrants, and fools. Although previous narratives, especially certain anti-clerical works in Europe, had already assigned the nun to such roles, Maria Monk's book left the greatest impression in the U.S. due to its

³⁶⁸ Sabine, 276-9; *Doubt*, directed and written by John Patrick Shanley, Miramax, 2009.

³⁶⁹ Sabine, 282; Ella Taylor, "Doubt Wags the Finger of Moral Relativism," *Village Voice* (December 9, 2008), <http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-12-10/film/doubt-wags-the-finger-of-moral-relativism/full/> (Accessed August 26, 2014).

popularity, sales, and steady stream of support and admiration. Suspicion of nuns lingered in American culture, which up through the mid-twentieth century did not lack “escaped nuns.” Mostly ignored by historians and serious scholars, popular culture shaped the image of nuns, drawing much of the same stereotypes.

While the school teacher nun reflects the abundance of teaching nuns in the early to mid-twentieth century, the array of nun caricatures really dates back to nineteenth century portrayals. The American campaign against convents that convinced average citizens to storm convents to free women from alleged oppression, induced money-hungry printers to publish stories of “escaped nuns,” led to the popularity of a host of romances, gothic tales, and stories of adventures that all centered around convents, and convinced an electorate to sponsor legislators who formed a “Nunnery Committee” to investigate convents has had far-reaching implications. These implications can be traced in images of nuns in literature from small and large publishers, racy and family-friendly films, and a host of toys, collectibles, and knick-knacks. Maria Monk and the American campaign against convents thus lives on in the popular American imagination.

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