

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/102671/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Heimann, Mary 2009. Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales , by Carmen M. Mangion (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 2008; pp. xiii + 281. £55) [Book Review]. *English Historical Review* 511 , pp. 1523-1525. 10.1093/ehr/cep287

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cep287>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Mary Heimann
Flat 1/2,
65 Fergus Drive
Glasgow G20 6AH
tel. 0141 946 7406
mary.heimann@strath.ac.uk

Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales, by Carmen M. Mangion (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2008; pp. xiii + 281. £55).

This well-researched and densely packed scholarly study, developed from the author's doctoral thesis, does at least two important things. First – and, in this reviewer's opinion, successfully -- it systematically uncovers, analyses and describes the internal workings of a large sample of Catholic women's religious communities in Victorian England, looking at such distinct aspects as women's reasons for entering a convent; the experience of the novitiate; class and ethnic tensions; and tussles over authority and governance. Following in the footsteps of historian Susan O'Brien, and drawing upon a wide range of diocesan and congregational archival materials, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* adds usefully to our knowledge of nineteenth-century English Catholic convents, outlining procedures, clarifying definitions and tabulating congregational growth. This aspect alone makes Mangion's book a valuable contribution to the field of English Catholic history.

It is in its second aim -- to scrutinize the 'identities' of women religious through 'the lens of gender, ethnicity and class' (p. 7) – that the book seems to run into problems: mainly structural, but also analytic. The book's chapter headings ('becoming visible'; 'choosing religious life'; 'forming a novice'; 'evangelising', 'professionalising'; 'building corporate identity'; 'class and ethnicity' and 'authority and governance') accurately indicate the content, argument, or both, of the chapters to

which they refer; but the three sections into which these eight chapters are organized ('developing identities', 'working identities' and 'corporate identities') do not seem to be properly integrated into an over-arching argument: the thesis alluded to in the book's main title. One is left with the uncomfortable sense that two different books are struggling for mastery within the same monograph: a straightforward survey of Victorian women's religious congregations, which might be called *Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England*; and a more trenchant, but not yet fully developed, thesis about the role of gender, class and ethnicity in Victorian female religious communities, which might be called *Contested Identities*.

The problem with the 'Contested Identities' part of the book is that it seems to fall into a new, feminist version of the old Whiggish trap, portraying vocation to the religious life as little more than a 'third way' for women unwilling to be cast into the restrictive roles of wife and mother or to be pitied and despised as spinsters to exercise their entrepreneurial or managerial skills. Although Mangion agrees in principle that Victorian women must be 'seen in the context in which they lived' and acknowledges the importance of what she calls 'religious ideology' in attracting them to the religious life, her general reliance upon such modern concepts as 'empowerment', 'leadership opportunities' and 'professionalisation' can make her seem tone-deaf to the religious sensibilities of the women she studies and to the complexity and earnestness of their own, quite different, theological, devotional and doctrinal language.

The current vogue among nineteenth-century historians to assume that it was primarily to flee the 'socially constructed' roles of wife, mother or daughter that women gave up their homes, the possibility of ever having children, and accepted the restrictions of obedience, chastity and poverty seems entirely to overlook the power of

the Gospel injunction to leave father and mother and follow the crucified Christ. Similarly, the assumption that class and ethnic divisions – which Mangion shows to have persisted even within religious communities -- were somehow of greater intrinsic significance than the nuns' stated attempts to die to self, live in charity and dedicate themselves to God – would presumably have baffled most Victorian novices, however well trained in inspecting themselves for sin. Mangion concludes her study with the claim that the collective experience of women religious should be seen as 'part of a larger story of women who strove to overcome the proscribed limitations of their gender to legitimate their claims to autonomy and power.' (p. 239) But the concepts upon which this grand narrative is based are not ones which the Victorians – let alone Victorian nuns -- would have recognized or been capable of sharing.

In *Frost in May*, Antonia White's classic tale of life in a Convent school, the Mistress of Discipline reminds the girls that their school exists 'to turn out, not accomplished young women, nor agreeable wives, but soldiers of Christ, accustomed to hardship and ridicule and ingratitude.' Mangion is quite right to remind us that Victorian women religious were often spirited and capable women: neither the hapless victims described in contemporary anti-Popery tracts nor the passive ciphers of modern patriarchal mythology. What she forgets is that their *raison d'être* was not secular accomplishment, or even social progress, but rather the pursuit of holiness. Antonia White, although a penetrating critic of the religious life, could see through even the most snobbish nun's faults to her underlying adherence to an alternative, supernatural system of belief. Mangion appears at times so transfixed by the apparent reflection of modern social, and especially feminist, conceptions that she rarely acknowledges what appears to be lurking underneath.

Mangion's view of nineteenth-century women religious as 'women who established and managed significant Catholic educational, health care and social welfare institutions in England', although it tells part of the story, seems unduly restricted, just as her claim that they had 'virtually disappeared' from history seems rather exaggerated. But she has produced a painstaking work of scholarship which brings to light a great deal of information about Victorian women's religious congregations and should help to ensure that they become both more visible and better understood.

MARY HEIMANN
University of Strathclyde