‘Religious first — teachers second’

Catholic elementary schooling in nineteenth-century South Australia

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Between the 1830s and 1860s Catholic children attended state and Catholic schools that were conducted by lay teachers, and both systems loosely supervised a variety of rural and urban schools. From the late 1860s, however, the education of Catholic children was wrested from lay teachers and became the province of Mary MacKillop and the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph. This article explicates the tensions surrounding this dramatic change in the teaching labour force. It demonstrates that the Sisters were resisted by lay teachers, parishioners and the local Irish clergy. Lay teachers were marginalised quickly but controversies between the male clergy and the Sisters over the governance of the Institute continued for more than 20 years. Notwithstanding these difficulties, some women were able to negotiate fulfilling religious and teaching careers as Sisters of St Joseph.

In the late 1830s South Australia’s founding investors were committed to organising education for working-class children, but other exigencies (including the colony’s bankruptcy in 1841) took precedence, and for the first decade of white settlement schooling was in private hands. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the state had become the major provider of compulsory schooling and the Lutheran and Catholic churches had established separate systems. This article focuses on the Catholic school system in South Australia and explicates the roles of lay teachers and women religious in its development.

The introduction of mass schooling in the nineteenth century has long been the subject of debate among historians of education. Liberal historians have viewed the free, compulsory and secular education acts as a benign project of the state to educate people in the common good while revisionist historians argue that compulsory schooling was imposed on working-class children to produce compliant workers in a period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (Barcan 1980; Miller 1986). More recently Pavla Miller and Ian Davey (Miller & Davey 1990; Miller 1998) have theorised that patriarchal as well
as class relations shaped schooling during the last stages of the transition to industrial capitalism. They argue that there was a crisis in the relations between children and adults within farming communities and proletarian families that prompted the traditional bastions of patriarchy, the churches and the state, to explore new forms of governance of children. The concomitant development of state and denominational school systems was central to this process. While Miller and Davey concentrate on state schooling, Marta Danyewycz (1987), for example, argues that the Catholic churches' increasing involvement in Canadian schooling helped to consolidate its power in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, she demonstrates that women religious were central to this process. The same argument can be made for South Australia, where the tightening of clerical control in the late 1860s expunged almost all lay men and women teachers, and Catholic elementary schools became the province of Mary MacKillop and the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph. To date, the tensions generated by this dramatic change in the Catholic teaching labour force have not been foregrounded in the South Australian context. Instead, the establishment of the Catholic school system is interpreted by Ronald Fogarty (1959) in terms of church and state relations, with the church assuming responsibility because the state refused to fund denominational schools. Marie Therese Faale (1989) writes from a similar perspective but delves into the controversies between the male clergy and Mary MacKillop over the governance of the Institute as the system expanded. She provides a comprehensive account of the Sisters' daily work as teachers but does not explore the tensions generated between them and the lay teachers. Vin Thomas's study (1989) of Catholic lay teachers demonstrates that many joined the state system as they lost their positions, but he does not engage with the tensions either.

This article focuses on Catholic teachers in nineteenth-century South Australia and discusses the implications for teaching families and women teachers in particular as the Sisters of St Joseph took control of Catholic schools. In the early years the Catholic and state systems supported sex-segregated schooling through the employment of husband and wife teaching teams, and, indeed, there was considerable overlap between the two systems. With the inauguration of the Sisters of St Joseph, teaching Catholic children became the province of single women. However, the article demonstrates that some Catholic parents resisted the Sisters as educators for their sons and continued to support state and Catholic schools, which were conducted by men. Although lay teachers struggled to present their case for continuing their work in Catholic schools, within a relatively short time most had lost their positions. The local male clergy, however, resisted the Sisters of St Joseph for more than 20 years. Given this context, this article also explores ways in which the women religious negotiated the ongoing crises surrounding the reorganisation of the Catholic school system.

**EARLY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

In South Australia the small Catholic community was mainly Irish and working class and there was no well-established middle class to support the establishment of Catholic schools. When Bishop Murphy arrived in the colony in 1843 he was dismayed by the state of Catholic education:

> The children are growing up in profound ignorance of the first rudiments of their religion, or what is worse they are imbibing false doctrine in Protestant and Methodist Schools. (quoted in Condon 1984, n.p.)

From the outset, Bishop Murphy supported sex-segregated Catholic schooling through the employment of husband and wife teaching teams. He endeavoured to provide Catholic schools by recruiting teachers from Sydney. Mr and Mrs James were the first recruits and they conducted a school in Adelaide until 1847 when he resigned and began a legal practice. Bishop Murphy then employed Mary Bull to take charge of the 'Catholic Female School' in place of Mrs James (Thomas 1989, pp.43, 64-72). Within a few months, however, Mary was replaced by another teaching team from Sydney. David and Ann Cremen. In November 1847 Bishop Murphy recorded:

> I have agreed to allow the Schoolmaster and Mistress, Mr and Mrs Cremen the sum of sixty pounds per annum and the rent of a house until 1 April next year. After that date they are to be allowed the whole proceeds of the school and the government allowance. (quoted in Condon 1983, p.119)

Thus Bishop Murphy intended that Catholic teachers would take advantage of the 1847 Ordinance, which provided state support for schooling. David and Ann's schools were licensed separately under the Ordinance and by 1848 at least three other Catholic schools were licensed in country areas (South Australian Government Gazette 17/1/1850, p.49).

Although Bishop Murphy informed a select committee of inquiry into education in 1851 that he would not allow Catholic children to attend state schools, he did not intervene when Catholic teachers whom he had sponsored applied for the government stipend under new legislation. The 1851 Act provided some funding for secular schooling, and state and Catholic education coexisted in at least seven schools between the 1850s and 1870s. In these schools Catholic teachers were able to circumvent the rules by giving religious instruction outside school hours. They were supervised by the state school inspectors in the same manner as other licensed schools, and the local Catholic clergy also visited to see that children were receiving adequate instruction. There were also some Catholic schools in Adelaide and in the country that were supported entirely by Catholic parishes. Teachers in these schools were granted the same autonomy over the conduct of their schools as occurred in state schools. Whatever the source of their sponsorship, Catholic and state school teachers faced similar challenges in securing children's attendance and earning a living (Fogarty 1959; Sheedy 1969). In Ann and David Cremen's case, however, these challenges were compounded by marital problems.

The Cremens were among the first teachers in Adelaide to be licensed under the 1851 Act. In September 1852 Ann was teaching 38 girls and David had 56 boys on his roll at their Franklin St schools. He left Adelaide late in 1852 but returned and successfully reapplied for his license early in 1853. In May 1854 Ann was refused a license for a school.
in Grenfell St because there were insufficient pupils. In June her application was supported by a character reference from Bishop Murphy:

During the five or six years that I have known her I hereby certify that her moral character has never to my knowledge been impeached except by her husband who afterwards declared in my presence that he made charges of immorality against her merely to annoy her, and that he was perfectly satisfied that she had been to him a faithful wife. (Minutes, Central Board of Education GRG 50/1, nos 1255, 1265, 1281)

This time her application was successful.

David Cremen was licensed at Franklin St until his death in October 1856 and Ann moved to Waymouth St the same year. In 1860 Inspector Wyatt reported that her school of eight boys and 31 girls was 'fairly conducted by a trained teacher under the disadvantage of great irregularity of attendance' (South Australian Government Gazette, 26/4/1867, pp.366-367). Ann continued to support her family as a state school teacher until the late 1860s.

Bishop Murphy died in 1858 and was replaced by Bishop Geoghegan who forbade Catholic parents to send their children to state schools and established a school fund to support Catholic teachers. By 1863 the school fund was assisting at least 15 schools and was itself funded by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Europe. Some Catholic schools had men teachers who were assisted by family members, and others, especially in rural districts, were conducted by women. Local priests had jurisdiction over the schools but there was no prescription of school organisation or curriculum content by the central authority. In 1866 there were 23 Catholic schools under clerical control and a few more that continued to accept state support. Nevertheless, these schools catered for only about one-quarter of the Catholic students in the colony (Fogarty 1959; Foole 1989; Thomas 1989).

In essence, in the 1850s and 1860s both the state and Catholic school systems were underpinned by the teaching family and remained sufficiently flexible to incorporate a variety of schools under their respective governances. Both systems concentrated their efforts on working-class children and both struggled to maintain country schools. In the case of the Catholic system these problems were compounded by the fact that its small and impoverished population was scattered widely throughout the rural areas.

'Some of our best teachers, male and female, have been driven out of the colony or into other avocations'

The catalyst for the reorganisation of the Catholic school system was Bishop Sheil’s arrival in South Australia. He was as dismayed as his predecessors about the state of Catholic education but introduced a much more far-reaching solution to the problem. Little did he anticipate the troubles that would follow.

In April 1867 Bishop Sheil and Father Woods unveiled their plan for the administration and staffing of Catholic schools. The system was to be controlled by a director general, a Central Council of clergy and laity, and local boards. Woods as director was responsible for the inspection and examination of schools, and certification of teachers (Fogarty 1959).

Father Woods was not only director but, with Mary MacKillop, established the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph. They envisaged an independent community of women religious committed to living among and educating the poor. The core of the Institute’s Rule was central government. The Institute was not subject to the local bishop’s authority, as were many religious orders, but existed under a General Superior who answered to the Holy See. In essence, Mary MacKillop was in charge of the recruitment, training and work of the women religious who were to educate the Catholic working-class children of the colony. She drew up a detailed set of instructions covering the organisation, curriculum and teaching methodology for use in Catholic schools. She advocated the monitory system of instruction and excluded music from the curriculum, reasoning that working-class children should not be educated beyond their station in life (Gardiner 1993).

Father Woods intended that the Sisters of St Joseph would undermine both the state schools and lay teachers. He confided to Mary MacKillop:

I think that, as we are trying to overcome competition and even Catholicise the country by means of schools, we should do more for the parents than ever they could expect from hired teachers and show them that we are utterly devoted to their interests. We shall soon crush the wretched government system. (quoted in Pickering 1989, p.72)

He soon signalled his intentions regarding both sets of teachers. He inspected the 19 Catholic schools, attacked the standards of teaching, and dismissed three women lay teachers for incompetence. He also attacked men teachers by reporting four Catholic state school teachers for breaches of the regulations regarding religion. Next, in October 1867 the Central Council passed a resolution that mixed schools should be conducted by women. At this meeting Woods claimed that men teachers 'seldom took the same interest in schools and pairs with the children which females did' (Southern Cross and Catholic Herald, 19/10/1867, p.19). His defence of women as the most suitable teachers of mixed schools defied conventional wisdom, which supported men as principal breadwinners and sex-segregated schooling.

The initial plan was to install the Sisters in schools in the poorest sections of Adelaide, and then extend Catholic schools into country districts. Mary MacKillop arrived in Adelaide from the town of Penola in July 1867 and with two other Sisters took charge of the Cathedral Hall school. At the time of Mary’s arrival Ann Cremen was teaching about 40 students and there was at least one more Catholic school in the city. Ann retained her students until the Sisters not only provided free education for the poorest children, but also food and clothing. By the end of 1867 Ann had lost her licence as a state school teacher and the Sisters had established the Cathedral Hall school as a model school (Foole 1989; Thomas 1989).

Father Woods also moved quickly to establish the Sisters in country districts in opposition to both Catholic lay and state school teachers. However, they received a
mixed reception from three different groups, namely parishioners, teachers and the local clergy. First of all, the Sisters owned no property and supported themselves from begging and school fees. Thus they were a considerable economic burden in impoverished rural communities. Some Sisters reported that they received more financial support from Protestants than from their Catholic parishioners. Parents were also sceptical about the Sisters’ teaching ability. Sr Gertrude found very little support from the parents when she and Sr Monica Phillips were despatched to set up a school at Macclesfield in the Adelaide hills. They managed to find a schoolroom and a gift of calico was used to make blinds. Sr Monica reported that ‘the schoolroom looks quite respectable and all we want now is a few desks, a few books and a great lot of pupils’. Of their first seven students, three could not read and the others knew very little. The priest preached the obligatory sermon demanding that the children be sent to the Catholic school but refused to help procure equipment. Nevertheless, Sr Monica rejoiced that ‘another scholar this morning is doing vulgar fractions ... nice piece of business’. By mid-July they had 40 pupils and the school was working according to Mary’s instructions (Phillips 9/6/1866, Letters of the South Australian Sisters).

With rapid recruitment into the Institute the proportion of well-educated sisters fell. Many were sent to teach in the country with little induction into religious life and even less training as teachers, hence the concern about their teaching ability. In 1868 Mary gave up teaching and moved among the schools to assist with lesson preparation and school organisation. She effectively became a school inspector. However, the country Sisters continued to be isolated from the main community by being placed in convents with only one or two others. Their letters to Mary reveal the loneliness of living and working in these adverse conditions. Their faith was sorely tested and many struggled to uphold both their religious and teaching vocations in the early years.

Second, there was active resistance from other teachers to the Sisters’ presence in small communities. Although parents were under strict instructions to support Catholic schools they were reluctant to send boys to women religious. At Burra, for example, Sr John Baptist Fitzgerald reported that the boys were not only ‘awfully rude’ but also continued to attend the state school, which was conducted by a Catholic teacher. The parents’ dilemma was usually resolved by sending the boys to the male teacher’s school (state or Catholic) and the girls to the Sisters, thereby satisfying the demand for sex-segregated schooling (Fitzgerald 6/7/1870, Letters of the South Australian Sisters). However, the loss of the girls’ fees threatened men’s livelihoods as teachers and generated tensions at the local level between the Sisters and laity. When Sr Josephine McMullen visited the convent at Clare in 1870 she clashed repeatedly with the Catholic lay teacher:

I have had two visits from Mr Graham, the schoolmaster, since I came up about inducing the girls to come to the Sisters. He said last Friday only I was a religious he would take legal proceedings against me. I told him it was my business to teach the girls and that I would do all I could to get them. (McMullen 25/12/1870, Letters of the South Australian Sisters)

Between 1867 and 1871 many Catholic lay teachers lost their positions but there was little sympathy for their plight. In 1871 it was argued that lay teachers had ‘gone through the bitter ordeal without the stroke of a pen from any individual to advocate their cause’ (Irish Harp and Farmers Herald, 18/11/1871, p.5).

The third group who opposed the Sisters of St Joseph were some Irish priests, and in some communities they were embroiled in disputes between teachers and women religious. The complexities of the struggle during this period can be seen in Catherine McMahon’s teaching career. Catherine was the Catholic lay teacher at Hectorville, not far from Adelaide, when the Central Council was established in 1867. She taught about 40 students and was acknowledged as a very efficient teacher. In April 1870, however, Catherine became a state school teacher with the connivance of the local priests, who stated that they ‘would rather have the grant than the Sisters’. This was a direct attack on Woods’ administration and he responded by sending two Sisters to establish a school close by. For four months the two schools competed for pupils until the local clergy capitulated to Fr Woods and accepted the Sisters. Catherine resigned as a licensed teacher and resumed her association with the Central Council, this time at the Norwood Catholic school. She stayed at Norwood from September 1870 until some time in 1872 when this school was also taken over by the Sisters of St Joseph. In November 1874 she applied to become a state school teacher at Armagh, a country school where there was a substantial Catholic population. Like many other Catholic lay teachers Catherine lost her place in the Catholic system and turned to the state school system for employment (Whitehead 1996, p.119).

In these disputes the priests’ concerns were not for teachers’ careers. Rather, they disapproved of the Sisters’ practices of living entirely from alms, of refusing to generate income by teaching music, and their refusal to organise into choir and lay sisters in the conventional manner of other women religious. The crux of the local clergy’s concern, however, was that this group of women religious were independent of their control. The priests had no say in the government of the Institute. In an era when female subservience to male authority was expected, Mary and the Sisters of St Joseph were answerable to a higher authority, the Holy See, not the local male clergy (Foale 1989, pp.56, 108-109).

Bishop Sheil was absent from the diocese for most of the period from 1867 to 1871 as tensions between the clergy and the Sisters escalated. When he returned to Adelaide in February 1871 he was mentally and physically ill. The priests petitioned him with their grievances about the Sisters and the conduct of the Catholic school system. A thorough inspection of the schools and the expedient removal of Fr Woods from the diocese did not pacify them. At the behest of a group of Irish priests Bishop Sheil attempted to take control of the Sisters and abolish the Institute’s central government. Mary refused to obey his order and insisted that she was, above all, answerable to God. She was excommunicated on 22 September 1871. More than 50 religious left the Institute or were expelled during this turmoil but 60 remained in their positions, mainly in country schools. Seventeen of the Sisters’ schools were either closed or taken over by lay teachers.
The whole saga of the excommunication was played out in the newspapers in the following months. A core of Catholic laity, especially those who had relatives in the Institute, supported Mary, and the Irish Harp advocated her cause so successfully that the dissident priests were silenced. Bishop Sheil was persuaded to lift the excommunication in February 1872, a week before he died. An investigation in 1872 exonerated Mary and the following year she travelled to Rome where the Constitutions of the Institute were ratified and central government confirmed. However, Mary MacKillop’s excommunication was only the first of many battles between male clergy and the Sisters of St Joseph over the governance of the Institute and ultimately over the education of Catholic working-class children. The male clergy in South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales contested her authority for nearly 20 years (Foale 1989).

At the time of the excommunication the Central Council was disbanded and the lay teachers were left to fend for themselves. Helen Sheedy (1969, pp.21-22) has identified at least 11 lay teachers besides Catherine McMahon who applied to the state school system between 1868 and 1874. Some continued as private teachers but this option became increasingly difficult as the Sisters of St Joseph regrouped and the Catholic and state school systems expanded in the 1870s. Such was the case with Eliza Parke of Einunga.

Eliza had established her school sometime in the 1860s in a building erected by the Catholic community but she was never counted as part of the Catholic school system. A school photograph dating from the 1880s indicates that she was teaching some very young students and, according to the 1890 census, 15 students were enrolled. However, in 1896 the Vicar-General visited Einunga and commented:

There is a property at Einunga on which there is a log hut. A poor old person named Miss Parks [sic] teaches school in it. She has eleven on [sic] but seldom has more than five. Miss Parks has not received any assistance from the District and cannot be counted as having a Catholic school. I believe it would be charity to give her a few pounds, she, I believe, should be in the destitute. (quoted in Thomas 1989, p.133)

In essence, the reorganisation of the Catholic school system from 1867 denied Catholic lay teachers the opportunity to earn a livelihood teaching children of their own religion. The traditional teaching family with its male head teacher had no place at all under the new arrangements, unlike the state school system where male privilege was upheld and protected at all levels. Women who wanted to teach Catholic children were faced with the additional choice of pursuing a religious vocation. Life in the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph was very difficult, but the next section will show that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century it offered selected women opportunities rarely available to those who remained in the secular world.

‘Our rights to a fair livelihood, to which we have just claims by our teaching and profession’

From the mid-1870s the Sisters of St Joseph not only dealt with the local clergy but also faced the significant challenge of extending and consolidating the Catholic school system in rural areas. As a result of the Strangways Act, passed in 1869, struggling farmers from the closely settled areas, many of whom were Catholic, moved north into the Flinders Ranges. Frequent droughts in these mostly marginal agricultural lands meant that farming families were often unable to make ends meet and the colonial economy fluctuated accordingly. This unparalleled agricultural expansion scattered the rural population and had enormous repercussions on the provision of schools (Williams 1969).

With the advent of compulsory schooling in 1875, the Catholic and state school systems competed to establish the first schools in the northern agricultural areas. In some places this competition assumed ridiculous proportions as both began schools in settlements barely able to support a school of any description. Salitla, for example, was populated mainly by the owners of bullock teams and the state school was ‘an abandoned dwelling house, very much in want of repair’. In May 1877 the Sisters of St Joseph opened a school and took most of the students from the state school. For two years both systems competed for students but the Sisters abandoned their school in 1879 (Whitehead 1996, p.205).

For women who pursued their teaching and religious vocations with the Sisters of St Joseph life was anything but easy in the late 1870s when the competition with state schools in the expanding agricultural areas was so intense. Marie Foale (1989, p.142) notes that ‘there was constant movement among the Sisters because the membership of the Institute and the number and location of schools were in a constant state of flux ... the Sisters were being extended to the full in order to meet the increasing demand for convents and schools’. The Institute tried to place young Sisters with more senior members so that they could learn by example but some found the isolation almost unbearable. Sr Peter Gough wrote from Willochra in the far north of the colony, ‘Sometimes I feel as if my heart would break with loneliness’ and went on to complain that Winifred, her companion was ‘too holy’. She concluded, ‘You have no idea what it is like in a lonely place with a holy Sister’ (quoted in Foale 1987, p.379).

In more closely settled districts where the convents were larger and the population a little more stable, women religious like Sr Eustelle Woods were more content. Eustelle took her vows in 1880. Her sister had been one of the earliest members of the Sisters and the Woods family had been particularly supportive of Mary MacKillop during the excommunication crisis. In the mid-1880s Eustelle was located at Clare with three others. The convent had been established in 1869 and the troubles with lay teachers in the district had long subsided (Sisters of St Joseph 1983).

The local priest at Clare was supportive, although Eustelle was slightly bemused by his constant attention. In a letter to Mary MacKillop she wrote:

Nearly every time he comes into the school he gives one of us a lesson on teaching, and as I am closest to the door he comes in at, I get the most of them. The other day he told me that when I was teaching I talked too much (an old complaint) and did not make the children speak out. (quoted in Sisters of St Joseph 1983, p.80)

Eustelle enjoyed life in the company of other women. She reported that she was the least serious of the Sisters at Clare and constantly played tricks on the others, including the
postulants. In fact she had to give up the position as Mistress of the Postulants as her charges did not take her seriously. She concluded:

I must try and be sensible as you will think I am as wild as ever... However whether I am wild or not I am very happy and can not help being joitirite as an old woman in Gawler used to say. (quoted in Sisters of St Joseph 1983, p.80)

Nevertheless, the ongoing battles between the Sisters and the Bishop over the government of the Institute caused great tension. The Bishop consistently challenged Mary MacKillop's authority in the Adelaide diocese. Although most of the Sisters supported Mary, a small group conducted a smear campaign against her. This dissented the problems caused by the Institute's precarious finances, climaxed in 1883, and the Bishop set up an official inquiry. He then expelled Mary from the diocese for reasons of drunkenness and embezzlement. She went to Sydney and was followed by more than 20 members. A new Mother House was established there and central government of the Institute was finally ratified by the Pope in 1888 (Foale 1987, pp.370-379; Gardiner 1993, pp.342-346).

For Eustelle Woods at Clare, these goings-on were a constant source of anxiety. She was worried that her father might intervene again in support of Mary and thereby exacerbate the tensions in the diocese. She was also torn between her religious and teaching vocation. Mary MacKillop stated that the sisters were 'Religious first — teachers second' (quoted in Gardiner 1993, p.451). However, the South Australian members realised that without Mary they would be under even more pressure to accept diocesan government. The Sisters who remained in the colony petitioned the Pope for the retention of central government. Eustelle wrote:

We are not willing to accept Diocesan Government and ask [that] our names be enjoined to the petition for Central Government. It would come very hard on us to leave the dear little children to the mercy of Public Schools, but when we do our best conscientiously maintaining our Constitutions, it will not be our fault if they are without schools. (Sisters of St Joseph 1983, p.81)

She resolved to stay in South Australia and continue to uphold both of her vocations.

Notwithstanding the early years of hardship, Eustelle Woods was able to pursue a satisfying religious and professional career. She had a valued place within a community of autonomous women. Her economic needs were met and she had security in her old age. Her work as a teacher of Catholic children was deemed important for its secular and religious components. In taking up a religious vocation, she had also chosen a viable and esteemed alternative to marriage and motherhood. Indeed Eustelle's membership of the Sisters of St Joseph enabled her to lead a useful and independent life.

With the loss of so many women religious to New South Wales, there were significant changes in the Catholic school system from the mid-1880s. The Sisters withdrew from the marginal agricultural lands in the far north of the colony, leaving the state system as the only education provider, and the Catholic system was consolidated in Adelaide and larger country towns. The number of Catholic schools in South Australia fell from 46 in 1882 to 26 by 1895 (Foale 1987, pp.405-410). Another catalyst for this process was the introduction of free state schooling.

Popular agitation for free schooling came initially from mining communities in 1878 when a downturn in the industry caused considerable unemployment, and intensified with the widespread economic decline in the 1880s. The first attempt to introduce free state schooling failed in 1890, but when improvements in the rural economy produced a budget surplus in 1891, legislation was passed in the House of Assembly. By the time it reached the Legislative Council, however, public protests were gathering momentum (Grundy 1983, p.183).

The Lutheran and Catholic systems launched separate campaigns against free education and a groundswell of opposition was registered by women teachers in private schools. In August and September 1891 a total of 162 petitions signed by 301 teachers were tabled in the Legislative Council (Whitfield 1891, pp.3-6). Among the petitioners was Eliza Parke, the Catholic teacher at Echunga, who claimed to be teaching 20 children. She candidly stated her opinion:

It is the duty of parents and guardians to provide for their children and to educate them; the law of God commands them to do so. I think the public money could be put to better use. Where poverty is, let the children be free, at Private or Public School. A man must pay the dog tax, the rates etc. I think he is a mean fellow who will ask the public to pay for the education of his children. (quoted in Whitfield 1891, p.31)

Women religious were also prominent among the petitioners. The sisters at St Raphael's Catholic school made a similar claim to those of women teachers in private schools: 'We shall be injured in our rights to a fair livelihood, to which we have just claims by our teaching and profession', while the two Sisters at Sevenhills objected to the legislation on the grounds that 'Roman Catholics would be taxed to support schools that they cannot in conscience make use of' (quoted in Whitfield 1891, p.31).

The protests from the churches and women teachers were to no avail. The legislation to introduce free state schooling was passed late in 1891 and state school enrolments had increased dramatically by 1895 (Grundy 1983; Miller 1986). Although the Catholic system faced increasing pressure with the advent of free state education, it retained most Catholic students and its remaining schools were substantial in size. With the exception of four lay teachers, however, all Catholic elementary schools were in the hands of women religious by 1900.

CONCLUSION

Marta Danyliewycz argues that 'a large female religious population was a precondition for clerical control and influence in society. Nuns provided the services upon which the hierarchy built a powerful church' (Danyliewycz 1987, p.149). This process happened remarkably quickly in South Australia but was vigorously contested by local clergy who lost administrative control of the schools, and lay teachers who either lost their livelihoods or had to find alternative sites for their work. In essence the extension of church
governance in the Catholic school system from 1867 delivered teaching into the hands of single women and excluded the teaching family (married women and men) from teaching Catholic children. From the time that Mary MacKillop established the Sisters of St Joseph, women’s opportunities to teach were mediated by their marital status as well as their commitment to the Catholic Church.

Mary MacKillop’s contributions were integral to the construction of a strong Catholic Church in South Australia. However, in 1877 she wrote ‘many prejudices are directed against myself, for bishops and priests think me some extraordinary and bold woman’ (quoted in Thorpe 1957, p.200). In an era when women were increasingly being confined to the domestic sphere, her influence in education was extraordinary. She was a leading figure in extending the power of the Catholic Church, its governance in the area of education, and the concomitant weakening of lay influence. She undertook administrative tasks that were usually the preserve of a very small group of middle-class men. These included laying down the blueprint for Catholic school organisation in South Australia. She was an inspector of schools long before any women were appointed in the state school system. And she was ultimately responsible for the recruitment, training, and teaching of a group of women religious whose schools extended into three colonies by the early 1870s. As the Sisters of St Joseph regrouped and expanded under her leadership after the excommunication, Catholic women who took the veil were able to pursue teaching as a life-work. Indeed, membership of the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph enabled them to pursue religious and teaching vocations in a relatively autonomous community of women.

REFERENCES
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