Maude O’Connell and ‘the need of the mother’

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Abstract: Maude O’Connell was a leader of Melbourne’s post-suffrage trade union movement and, in the late 1920s, founded the Grey Sisters, a religious congregation to assist over-burdened mothers. O’Connell’s exercise of leadership was shaped by the untimely death of her own mother, by her religious faith and by her seeming disregard of gender norms. She gained much support from May Bannon, one of the first entrants to her congregation, who remained her ‘constant companion’ until her death. The foundation of the Grey Sisters was a compassionate response to ‘the need of the mother’ but it also supported papal teaching on birth control. Like many women who exercised leadership in the church, O’Connell perpetuated that teaching while trying to mitigate its consequences.

Keywords: trade union, equal pay, motherhood, maternal mortality, social work, charity, family, religious sister, nun, Catholic, church

As a trade unionist and founder of a religious congregation, Maude O’Connell was a leader in areas usually seen as widely divergent. In post-suffrage Victoria, she organised women in the Tobacco Workers Union (TWU) and represented the TWU on the Trades Hall Council; she was a prime mover in the formation of the Catholic Women’s Social Guild (CWSG) in 1916; and, in the late 1920s, she founded a religious congregation dedicated to providing practical assistance with housework and child-care to over-burdened mothers. Although the strong connections between Catholics and the labour movement in early 20th-century Victoria are legendary, the qualities associated with women trade unionists and religious sisters are usually seen, if not as entirely opposed, then hardly as congruent; the archetypal female trade unionist is known for her self-assertion, the woman religious for self-abnegation. Maude O’Connell’s life enables us to examine the more complex relationships between the worlds of these women, and how the competing ideals of self with which they were associated were played out. The tragically early death of O’Connell’s mother, her deepening religious faith, and the support of May Bannon—the first entrant to the Grey Sisters and her ‘constant companion’ from 1930 to 1964—were important in shaping her life and her exercise of leadership. The issues she confronted illuminate the broader problems and
opportunities facing women in the labour movement and the church, and in child and maternal welfare in 20th-century Australia.

The reach of O’Connell’s influence and the power of her personality can be seen, not only in her entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, but in the three histories her congregation boasts, even though at its largest it had only twelve members. The papers of the Company of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament (known as the Grey Sisters) in the Mitchell Library and in the State Library of Victoria contain memoirs of her life, which are the only sources for her early years. Recovering the lives of working-class women is difficult, because few left records and other information is scant. Penned by O’Connell herself, by Bannon and by unnamed authors, these memoirs are therefore both unusual and useful, not only for the information they provide, but for their slight differences in emphasis and interpretation. These papers also contain a number of unpublished histories assembled by O’Connell and Bannon that reflect O’Connell’s disenchantment with the direction the order took in the 1950s and her energetic attempts to put the record straight. They make poignant reading, but they also provide insights into the deeper sources of her disappointment that have significance for women in the church and in welfare work more broadly.

**Early Life**

The untimely death of her mother had a profound influence in the shaping of Maude O’Connell’s life, forcing on her an early independence and underpinning her dedication to assisting women and children. Rosina Hosking, the daughter of Cornish gold-rush immigrants, married Irish-born Patrick Martin O’Connell in 1883. Cecily Maude, their eldest child, was born in Beaufort Victoria on 30 June 1884. The young couple ran the general store at Beaufort in the second half of the 1880s, during which time three of their four surviving children were born. Though O’Connell was ‘rather given to refraining from speaking of her childhood’, as May Bannon put it with exemplary circumspection, one of her stories from these years is telling. It describes the tiny Maude trying to shepherd the Catholic women of Beaufort, who were gossiping in the churchyard one Sunday morning, into the church so that she could lead the prayers—just as her father led the prayers on those Sundays when the priest did not come. It is a story of initiative, zeal and not knowing her place. It also shows Maude modelling her behaviour on that of a man, pointing to one of the keys to understanding her leadership: the apparent artlessness with which she transgressed gender norms.
Over the next five years, when the Victorian economy was plunged into depression, the family moved from one mining town to the next, seeking business in the wake of diggers. By the time Maude was eleven, they had moved from Beaufort to Bairnsdale, Kilmore and Walhalla. It was at Walhalla in 1895 that Rosina O’Connell died, aged 36, ‘worn out by the cares of a large family, business worries and the hard conditions of country life’. Maude’s sense of loss was intense, sharpened by the fact that she was not told directly of her mother’s death and that she found out about it only when she saw the funeral procession winding its way up the hill from the front window of a neighbour’s house. This was a memory, according to May, that she never lost. Maude was sent to Abbotsford, Melbourne, and lived ‘for some time’ with relatives of her mother’s family. ‘They were strangers to her’, May Bannon wrote. The death of her mother and her ‘sudden removal’ to Melbourne had a lasting effect on her character, making her independent, self-reliant and giving her a ‘strong understanding of what isolation could mean’.

At Abbotsford, she attended the state school and, ‘at the time of leaving’, became a pupil teacher, for which she gained a ‘very good’ reference from the head teacher. The main features of her adolescence are not clear but, some time in the early 1900s, she started working for the British Australasian Tobacco Company (BATC). Bannon wrote later that she wanted ‘to find out at first hand the conditions of the women workers’, an interpretation in keeping with the militant maternalism of her later life. But despite her intelligence, resilience and good school reference, she probably had little choice about how to support herself. In an economy recovering from depression, her father was unlikely to be able to support her further education. As one memoir put it, following the death of her mother, ‘she now had to stand alone’. It was about this time that she took an active interest in religion. In Bannon’s words, she ‘felt the need of God’ so she ‘took herself to a priest in Melbourne’ and asked him ‘to help her understand her religion’.

**Trade Union Leader**

O’Connell began her work as a trade unionist at an early age, probably before she was twenty, and became a notable participant in Victoria’s early 20th-century union movement. She built up membership of the ‘Female Branch’ of the Tobacco Workers Union (TWU), taking advantage of the increasing interest of women in unionism that had been generated by the struggle for female suffrage in Victoria and by the apparent benefits of arbitration. In a testimonial letter written when she left the TWU, ‘Fighting Bob’ Solly, president of the Trades Hall Council and first paid organiser with the TWU,
recalled that, as ‘a very young woman’, O’Connell had volunteered to travel alone and ‘in the heat of the drought’ to Victoria’s Mallee country, where she had given her ‘ultra-conservative lady opponents … food for reflection’ after a two-thirds decrease in the conservative vote. When the Female Branch of the TWU was formed in 1904, women initially showed little interest in it but, according to Solly, O’Connell played ‘an outstanding part’ in organising them and was instrumental in establishing the TWU’s sick and accident fund. Given that women’s employment in the tobacco industry was organised as piecework, which generally impeded unionisation, her achievement was all the more notable.

As a leader of the Female Branch, O’Connell made it clear to male union leaders that the interests of women were not the same as those of men. She had some notable successes, especially given that the identity of some male unionists was so threatened that they objected to her participation in union meetings. In 1910, she protested when the union agreed to certain days being declared holidays without the women being consulted, after which she was elected to a committee from which emerged the first agreement on designated holidays and penalty payments. Under her leadership in March 1911, the Female Branch successfully negotiated a pay rise by threatening to strike. May Bannon recalled her proclivity for direct and spontaneous action, recounting the story of her arrival at work one morning to find a group of young female workers locked out of the factory; she took them around to the back entrance of the building so that they could enter and get down to work, after which the matter was ‘settled in a regular way’.

On the crucial issue of women’s access to work she was tenacious but less successful. Despite her attempts in 1911 to prevent the men from taking some of the women’s ‘best class’ of leaf work—by asking them to stick to their ‘honourable agreement’ and calling for a vote—she was outmanoeuvred. Underpinning the obduracy of the male unionists was the widely held assumption that women worked for ‘pin money’, an assumption O’Connell fought hard to combat but one that remained entrenched in the rules governing the Female Branch: married women were not to be employed ‘unless under extenuating circumstances’, and the redundancy policy that ‘no man should be put off due to slackness of trade’ did not apply to women. In this, the TWU was a microcosm of the wider ‘unresolved tension’ in labour’s attitudes to women’s rights, and O’Connell one of the few women who defended those rights.

O’Connell was also one of few women elected to peak labour organisations. In 1915, she was one of three of the TWU’s delegates to the Trades Hall
Council, a position she held on and off until 1922. She was elected to membership of the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee and became one of five of its members to be elected to the ‘hotly contested’ role of life governor of Melbourne’s charitable institutions. One of the stories told of her at this time was that she was such an effective union leader that the BATC offered her an executive position. It was an offer she took pride in rejecting; most memoirs of her life include her retort, ‘I am not up for sale’.

O’Connell also took a leading role in the ‘deadly struggle’ between Catholic and Labor Party interests over the funding of Catholic education in Victoria during the war years. This confrontation was a result of a new assertive Catholicism that emerged following the death of Cardinal Patrick Moran in 1911. It took stronger root in Victoria than NSW, in part because of Moran’s conciliatory legacy in NSW, in part because Jesuit influence was stronger in Victoria, but also because it was promoted by the co-adjutor archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, who was appointed in 1913. Its mouthpiece and organisational base was the Catholic Federation of Victoria. Founded in 1911 and modelled on organisations in Europe and America, the Catholic Federation of Victoria tried to mobilise a Catholic vote, making funding for Catholic schools the lynch-pin of its support for individual MPs during the 1914 election campaign. At that election, in addition to supporting eighteen Labor candidates, the Catholic Federation supported fifteen Liberals—trying to rescind the support Labor had grown to expect from Catholics. In response, Victoria’s Political Labor Council banned its members from joining the Catholic Federation and, in 1914 and 1915, there was ‘open war’ between the Labor Party and the church.

Like many labour movement Catholics, O’Connell saw the funding of Catholic education as a matter of justice and she defended Catholics’ right to exercise freedom of conscience. She also saw education as a women’s issue because women were ‘peculiarly and deeply interested in the children’. But she still supported Labor. At a public meeting in 1915—where she was proclaimed by the Austral Light to be ‘the first Catholic woman to stand upon a public platform in this State, to fight for the rights of her co-religionists’—Maude declared that she would continue to support Labor even if ‘excluded’ for it was ‘the party of progress’. She worked to establish the Catholic Workers’ Association in September 1915 to work for the cause of Catholic education within the Labor Party. At its inaugural meeting in September 1915, the chairman, E. Adams, acknowledged the work of Maude O’Connell ‘for her services in setting up the Association’.

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Catholic Women’s Social Guild

In 1916, during one of the most acute moments of political sectarianism in Australian history, O’Connell strengthened her connection with the Catholic church by taking the paid position of organising secretary of the newly formed Catholic Women’s Social Guild (CWSG). During her years at the BATC, O’Connell had engaged in what May Bannon called ‘humane charity’. An effective piece worker, after finishing a day’s work she joined the Sisters of Charity from St Vincent’s Hospital visiting women released from hospital. This widened her experience of unmet needs and fuelled ideas for her later work.

The Guild was not primarily a philanthropic organisation. Rather, it was intended ‘to arouse the social conscience … and to make religion a power in the commonwealth of women’. It was an expression of that same Catholic social militancy that had spawned the Catholic Federation but also part of a wider surge in women’s activism generated by the First World War and manifest in movements such as the peace movement, the anti-conscription movement and the Housewives’ Association. Since all lay initiatives in the Catholic church needed clerical support, its foundation would not have been possible without the commitment of the Jesuit, William Lockington, whose ‘intense social conscience’ and support for lay activity put him in the forefront of Catholic social reform. The memoirs of Maude O’Connell’s life show that she too played a part in its formation. According to one, she approached Lockington, telling him of the many women and girls made homeless by the industrial disputes of 1916 and pointing out that, in contrast to the YWCA and the Salvation Army, no Catholic organisation provided accommodation for girls. One of the first ventures of the CWSG was a hostel for women and girls in Gore Street, Fitzroy.

As organising secretary of the CWSG, Maude lived a ‘strenuous life’, which involved opening branches, co-ordinating the Guild’s activities, public speaking and writing for its magazine, Woman’s Social Work. As in her work with the TWU, she built up the membership. By the middle of 1919, there were 257 members of the Cathedral branch and nearly 500 in Ballarat. Her imprint is particularly clear in the CWSG’s emphasis on the rights of working-class women in paid work. While the CWSG shared the anti-capitalist strand of some of Victoria’s Catholic male groups formed at this time, it differed from these, and from the weight of labour opinion, in having what historian Sally Kennedy has called a ‘remarkably forward looking’
emphasis on conditions for working women, including support for equal pay. Maude O’Connell’s knowledge and experience was the most important influence informing this politics. She knew that ‘self-and-family-supporting women’ constituted ‘an astonishingly large element of society’ because she was one of them, and she had worked among them for over a decade. In response to the worsening conditions caused by the strikes and lockouts of 1917, the CWSG mounted a campaign to expose the wages and conditions of working women. Lockington denounced the ‘unholy exploitation’ of women and girls paid ‘starvation wages’ in Melbourne’s factories. The Guild raised funds to distribute relief but, as Lockington saw it, this was ‘only palliation, and not a remedy’. What use was there in ‘our brothers at the front … fighting and dying for freedom’ when ‘their helpless sisters’ endured ‘such foul conditions’ at home. It is unlikely that O’Connell saw her sisters as ‘helpless’. In an earlier article in Woman’s Social Work, she wrote that ‘the modern girl’ did not want ‘benevolent patronage’ but ‘the self-reliant co-operation of her own class’. But it is highly likely that she provided the data with which Lockington supported his case: that under the wages boards women under 21 could legally be paid from 9s to 14s per week; that 2903 women were out of work because of the strike.

The CWSG was criticised by churchmen for not giving due importance to women in the home. Following a lecture by O’Connell on the exploitation of women’s and children’s labour, Dr Mannix reminded his audience that, while a woman should take a ‘reasonable interest’ in public questions, her primary duty was at home. Correspondents to the Tribune also objected that the CWSG did not give due importance to women in the home, as did the ‘radical’ magazine, Australia. In fact, Woman’s Social Work carried many articles dealing with the health of women and children in the family; what it largely omitted was imagery that romanticised motherhood. Further, while it argued that women in the workforce were entitled to justice, such women were seen as having to work from necessity, not choice. The working married woman with children was seen as piteous: the widow, deserted wife or mother of a sick man had been ‘driven out of the home’ to the workforce. The claim to equal pay was not intended as a rejection of the church’s model of family life, but it was readily interpreted as such.

O’Connell’s declamatory style, absorbed at least in part from listening to Catholic sermons, came in for criticism. Mannix had acclaimed her oratory in 1915 when she defended Catholic interests on education. He was less impressed when she asserted the rights of women, likening her, after her address to the first annual conference of the CWSG in 1917, to one of those women who ‘wanted to push themselves into every possible department of
industry’. He got a laugh from the audience when he continued that he felt ‘rather comfortable’ because, ‘whatever might be done in other churches’, he was in a position in the Catholic church that women could not take from him. It is unlikely that O’Connell was amused. Some time later, she wrote of her frustration when men smiled patronisingly at the idea of equal pay: ‘when a woman is serious, nothing irritates her so much as not to be taken seriously’.

Maude O’Connell resigned from the central committee of the CWSG in 1919. It is not clear why, but her radical views and uncompromising expression of them may have put her at odds with the organisation. The CWSG was led by an unusually well-educated, strong-minded group of women, a subset of that international cohort of first-generation women graduates who remained unmarried. Most had professional degrees: Mary Glowery and Eileen Fitzgerald were medical doctors, Anna Brennan and Louise Barry were lawyers, Julia Flynn a teacher and later inspector of schools. Though the abrupt termination of her formal education set O’Connell apart from these women, as a natural orator and prolific writer with a broad command of political economy, she interacted with them as an equal. There were inevitably political differences between them. Following a paper read by O’Connell on ‘Women in Industry’ at the first CWSG conference, Anna Brennan criticised it as having ‘a horrible protectionist fallacy about it’. In January 1918, Brennan was writing in alarm in Women’s Social Work that ‘the factories’ were being made centres for distributing ‘Socialistic literature’. However, the issue that most effectively divided the CWSG was related to feminist rather than class politics and pitched the first committee against the hierarchy, not each other. Centred on a dispute over affiliation with the National Council of Women, one of whose leaders was accused of having spoken at a pro-conscription meeting called ‘to vilify His Grace, the Archbishop’, it resulted in the mass resignation of the central committee in 1920. As Cecily Close has argued, their block departure reflected the depth of ‘antagonism and restlessness’ in Catholic organisations at this time.

O’Connell’s resignation predated this, however, and it may have been related to personal disappointment. During her years with the CWSG, O’Connell considered becoming a medical missionary in India. In preparation for this, she underwent nursing training at the Eye and Ear Hospital, where Mary Glowery had a position. Most of the biographies of Maude’s life say that she had been hoping to go to India with Glowery as a medical missionary, and most say that she was prevented from going because of poor health. May Bannon’s narrative, however, provides a slightly different interpretation. According to her, Glowery made her final arrangements to join a Dutch
missionary religious order without telling Maude. When Maude found out, ‘the news was a cause of great disappointment to her, and really affected her health’. Glowery’s biographer, Ursula Clinton, writes that Glowery’s plans to join this congregation had dated back to 1915 and were kept a secret from all but her family ‘and a few very close friends’. Sadly, Maude was not among them. After leaving the paid position of organiser with the Catholic Women’s Social Guild, O’Connell returned to the BATC and the Trades Hall, and continued her works of ‘humane charity’.

The Grey Sisters

By the late 1920s, O’Connell’s vision had shifted to women in the home and it was here that the most enduring monument to her leadership was centred. During the long years of the 1930s depression, the Company of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, known as the Grey Sisters, went into the homes of overworked and ailing mothers and helped with housework and the care of their children; they also provided respite care at a holiday house at Daylesford. Proffering help with mothering to working-class women was a radical and creative initiative. O’Connell wrote later that her stimulus was seeing a mother’s life ‘threatened at time of childbirth’, an incident that doubtless fed the memory of her own mother’s death and whose significance was heightened by the growing awareness of maternal mortality in the community more generally. Concerns that maternal deaths in Australia were unacceptably high and that women’s resort to abortion was contributing to them became widespread in the 1920s. Infant mortality had been a national issue since the 1890s and, by 1926, there were 62 baby health centres in Victoria but these offered no direct assistance to mothers. Indeed, there was little acknowledgment within the public culture that motherhood was debilitating, despite middle-class complaints about the lack of domestic servants. O’Connell saw her work as both ameliorative and sustaining, providing sufficient short-term help to assist families to get by. It would also support Catholic teachings on reproduction. While the service was offered to all regardless of ‘race, colour or creed’, O’Connell and her patron, the Reverend William Collins, had chiefly in mind ‘the good and even saintly mother—whose fidelity to God’s commandments has brought her almost unendurable burdens’. The visitation of mothers was only part of O’Connell’s early scheme. She had grand plans for a new ‘Training School of Social Service’. Unlike the university, this school would train workers spiritually as well as ‘scientifically’, for ‘religious Professional Service [sic]’. They, in turn, would provide religious mothercraft training for ‘Potential Mothers’. O’Connell’s vision was holistic and anti- secular.
The foundation date of the Company is usually given as 1930 when O’Connell acquired a house at Daylesford, but she preferred to see its commencement as 1928. Around this time, she became increasingly engaged in ‘social work’ and increasingly preoccupied with finding a way to dedicate her life to it. According to one memoir, Maude had ‘long felt she had a vocation, but not in a convent’. Though she did not have a clear idea of how she would do it, she wanted to devote her life to ‘Social Welfare not as a hobby—or merely a public duty—but as the natural outcome of my religion or—living the Gospel’. She also wanted some form of community life. In an early letter to May Bannon, she wrote of ‘a very great longing for the close community life we so much require’.

The year 1928 was also when she met the Reverend William Collins. She had approached Dr Mannix and was in correspondence with a number of priests but it was Collins whose support enabled her to put ‘the work’ on a firm footing.

Collins, appointed to Melbourne’s St Francis Church in 1926 and visitor to the Melbourne and Queen Victoria hospitals, had seen at first hand the ill effects on hospitalised parturient women of the anxiety they felt for their children at home. He was conscious of this as a particular problem for Catholic women for ‘the greater the fidelity of mother and father to the laws of God, the more the absence of mother in hospital, and the greater the drain on her vitality, and consequently the greater the need for help.’ While there is debate over the extent to which religious belief played a part in the fertility levels of Catholic women in Australia in this period, Collins’s comments are telling of his—and Maude’s—motivation. Certainly Catholic teaching on contraception was reinforced in newly strident terms in Pope Pius XI’s encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, issued in 1930. But, while O’Connell’s work would support this papal teaching, her responses to it were different from that of the priestly hierarchy. She was angry that the church did nothing to support the women who bore the brunt of its teachings. In her first meeting with Collins, she made a ‘devastating critique’ of the defects of Catholic social work. In her view, the church had made ‘certain laws regarding the family’ and therefore had ‘an obligation to assist mothers to carry out their obligations’. While Collins saw in her scheme ‘an antidote to the nefarious propaganda of the contraceptionists’, for her ‘the need of the mother’ was its driving force.

Collins told her that the only way she could develop her work was to form a religious congregation. At first, O’Connell was resistant to this, arguing that if Salvation Army and Presbyterian women engaged in social work, so too could Catholic laywomen, concluding that she did not, in any case, ‘believe in
conscription’. By 1931, O’Connell was converted to the idea of forming a religious community. In retrospect, she described coming to her ‘Recognition of vocation’:

I had tried to distract myself by reading, music and by interesting myself in a garden and taking long walks in the country … The more I prayed to get rid of the idea, the more anxious I became to adopt it. I had left my employment that day simply because I could no longer concentrate on my work.

She describes coming to discern God’s will through prayer and personal counselling, but her interpretations of God’s will were shaped by what she knew God’s agents would tolerate. Though she had tried to push the boundaries of laywomen’s work, Collins had left her in no doubt about their limits. Without formal training, which was just becoming available in Australia, she could not work in a hospital or the nascent Catholic welfare agencies. In any case, she had a new idea and wanted to start a new agency. She had thought for a while that an existing religious congregation might allow her to use its convent as a base from which to pursue her work, but none were interested. It is not surprising that she came to recognise a vocation. It was the only way she had of putting her ideas into practice.

Collins’s commitment to her work was important but gaining financial support was not easy and the first major steps towards establishing the Company were not taken until 1930. This was in part because of Collins’s ill health but Maude was well known in Melbourne’s labour and Catholic circles and, according to Collins, had ‘trodden on the corns of several people’ in the ‘sheer honesty and single-mindedness of purpose’ with which she tried to get the work going. Mannix tried without success to persuade the CWSG to support the venture; nor did a proposed auxiliary of ‘influential women’ take it up. In 1930, however, the Company acquired property and personnel. Collins, who had been sent as parish priest to Daylesford in 1928, helped O’Connell acquire a holiday house there for recuperating mothers, which they named ‘Kewn Kreesther’, Gaelic for ‘The Quiet of Christ’. The arrival of Mary Bannon at the end of the year was another important marker. Maude had started with a few helpers but they had either left of their own accord or been considered unsuitable. Bannon was 36 years old when she saw an advertisement for the Company in the Advocate. Having cared for her invalid mother and then taken a job as a live-in help, she was well suited to providing ‘personal service’ in the homes of the poor. According to Collins, she was placid, devout, entirely self-effacing, had rare business acumen and a devotion to Maude that ‘almost amounted to hero-worship’.
year, there were four or five applicants to the Company of whom two, Vera Kerlin and Edith Gunter, became long-standing members. According to Collins, they worked as ‘a real team’: ‘It suited Miss O’Connell’s genius to be a leader, and the others were happy and contented under her leadership’.  

By 1932, the Company was becoming known to doctors, health officials, district nurses and the Women’s Hospital, all of whom referred ‘cases’ to them. In 1933, Collins assisted them in acquiring property in Surrey Hills and that year they made 317 visits to homes ‘of every denomination’. In its first year, ‘Kewn Kreesther’ gave 35 women suffering from illness or overwork ‘the first holiday in their married lives’. The idea that poor mothers needed a break from their children was not new. The Mother’s Clubs run by various women’s church groups in the inner city had long recognised this, but while their assistance ran only to an afternoon’s help, the Grey Sisters gave women a complete break for two or three weeks. One mother of six young children, who in 1934 was ‘very ill and nervous’ and ‘trying to struggle along on a small income’, was sent to Daylesford ‘for complete rest away from children’. When the mother was at Daylesford, or hospitalised, the Grey Sisters would look after the family. In one case, where the father had to leave early for work, one of the sisters came to the house each day for eight weeks to prepare breakfast, send the children to school and care for the baby. By 1936, there were nine sisters in the Company. With suitcases containing the day’s provisions, they travelled across the city, by train or in their small car.

The work of the Grey Sisters was featured in the Melbourne press in the 1930s. They were something of a novelty at first, photographed smiling in their sensible grey uniforms and distinctive hats, looking like laywomen but with the aura of a religious community. By 1940, they were almost a Melbourne institution, admired for their ‘magnificent heroism’. They drew support from Melbourne’s political, medical and welfare elite, including Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown, director of infant welfare in the Department of Health, Enid Lyons, wife of the prime minister, and an auxiliary made up of ‘the cream of the Catholic women of Melbourne’. Churchmen proclaimed their work as nation-building. At various fund-raising functions in the 1930s, Archbishop Mannix spoke of his hope that the work of the Grey Sisters would ‘lead the way to filling the empty cradles’, for the ‘birth rate problem’ was ‘of vital interest to Australia’. Their integration into Melbourne’s welfare scene is reflected in O’Connell’s invitation to give evidence to the Victorian Select Committee (SC) on Child Endowment in 1939.

Not all were impressed. The CWG’s *Horizon* ignored the opening of the centre at Prahran in 1933, despite it being hailed as the first ‘Catholic Child
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Welfare Centre in Australia’ and being opened by Dr Mannix. O’Connell’s politics undoubtedly put some off. She thought Fr Lonergan of St Patrick’s Cathedral considered her ‘an agitator’ and ‘a Bolshevik’. He had tried to get the Company to amalgamate with the Brown Sisters in Sydney, telling William Collins that Mannix was anxious to get the responsibility for the Grey Sisters ‘off’ his hands. Others accused the sisters of allowing themselves to be ‘the vehicle of Communist propaganda’, presumably a response to the entertainment organised by communists at Clifton Hill, after the Sisters had helped in ‘a Communist home’. While fear of communism saturated local communities in the 1930s, it was not unusual for Christian activists to see their work as the best antidote to it. Collins’s comment that if there was a group of Grey Sisters in every industrial parish there would be no need to fear ‘being overwhelmed by the Marxists’ is reminiscent of how Gerard Tucker saw the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Like Tucker’s Brotherhood, the work of the Grey Sisters was steeped in the language of Catholic charity. Their respect for the poor had shades of ‘holy poverty’ and their desire to be non-judgmental led to that assumed superiority that depicted Protestant charity as condescending and self-righteous. In contrast to the Grey Sisters, unnamed ‘other’ charity workers, according to Collins, ‘observe the homes of the poor with raised eyebrows, and expansion of the nostrils and give lectures on home management’. In a bid to capture the working class for Catholic doctrine, he also represented those charity workers as having ‘an expression of unsympathetic wonderment at the prolificness of the working classes’.

The Company declared its openness to all regardless of colour race or creed and, with referrals from health officials, the sisters did deal with a cross-section of the community. However, their sympathies were particularly with ‘good and saintly mothers’ and they were also concerned to bring lapsed Catholics back to the practice of their faith. This was said to be achieved by example rather than proselytising. Looking back in 1959, O’Connell wrote that the sisters’ ‘silent sermon on charity’ had effected enough ‘interesting conversions’ to fill a whole volume. But the unpublished correspondence between O’Connell and Collins suggests that silent charity may not have been their only means of communication. Collins thought the sisters should give ‘the word of sisterly encouragement’ to ‘faithful’ mothers, that clergy would refer to them Catholics who had ‘fallen away’ and that, through their ‘practical interest’, the sisters would try to lead the lapsed ones ‘back to the lives of practical Catholics’. It is unclear to what extent the Grey Sisters spoke of Catholic teaching on reproduction in the homes they visited. Their presence was intended to make recourse to ‘prevention’ or abortion
unnecessary. Some women confided in them. O’Connell told the Select Committee on Child Endowment that ‘people tell me they dread the thought of another child. They say they have to struggle all the way, and some of them say they almost wish they were dead’. When they found out they were pregnant, they had ‘to bear the brunt of complaints and disapproval from the husband’. O’Connell’s stricture surrounded with precaution any conversation her sisters might have in the homes. The sisters made a ‘solemn promise of secrecy’ and were told to treat any confidences as ‘sacred’. She instructed the sisters that their conversations should be ‘Guarded, not trivial, not condescending. Complete silence would be oppressive, but it is better than too much loquacity. Try for the Golden Mean’. Guarded against initiating intimate conversation? Against being seen to proffer advice in a sectarian context to people in extreme poverty? While much remains unclear about the intimate interface between sisters and mothers, there is evidence that the sisters’ help was appreciated by the families they assisted. In addition to substantiation provided in published testimonials, O’Connell’s unpublished report for 1933–34 recounts one ‘extremely grateful’ father, who, having never received charity before, had his ‘outlook’ on charity altered ‘somewhat’ by the work of the sisters. May’s retrospective comment that ‘it was a joy helping the people, in most cases at that time in extreme poverty’ speaks of the appreciation and respect they earned.

While O’Connell’s expression of charity reflects her immersion in Catholic tradition, she brought to it her characteristic vigour. She had told the Select Committee on Child Endowment that some of the children in the homes they visited were so hungry that they ate newspapers, clay and grease from the rocking horse but she found it ‘disgusting’ when her evidence was sensationalised by the newspapers. She saw the problems of the poor as largely outside their own control. The causes of child malnutrition were, according to her evidence before the select committee, the ‘insufficiency in the father’s wage’ and the lack of an endowment fund. While people suffering low wages and unemployment were losing their ‘self-respect, independence and desire’, they still had ‘initiative and the spirit of independence’ and would be ‘good Australian citizens if they were given opportunity’. O’Connell had an acute sense of empathy that came from her own experience of suffering. According to Bannon, she was ‘a person sympathetic to the extent of self-sacrifice’. She was ‘of a nervous temperament’ and had found some of the social work she did before forming the congregation harrowing—she had stayed overnight, for example, in the lodgings of a young suicidal woman ‘in great distress’, and found the experience very stressful.
Self-sacrifice loomed large in the Catholicism of this period, entrenched in the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, and liable to interpretation by churchmen as particularly appropriate for women. In the early years, it was not unusual for the Grey Sisters to be in ‘straitened circumstances’ but they were commended by Collins for their unwillingness to ‘transfer their financial troubles’ to him.  

Mgr Lynch, who made available to them a ‘hovel’ in Prahran with no bathroom in return for them taking his parish census, thought that living in such a place would show that they were willing ‘to live like the people they wished to help’. This had never been O’Connell’s aim. Though she and Bannon lived close to poverty in the early years, O’Connell was never a champion of extreme self-abnegation for its own sake. Indeed, one of the differences of opinion she had with Collins in the late 1930s was over the use of a property at Croydon as a ‘House of Recollection’ for the sisters ‘to support the weary busy activities of the members’.

As the acute economic distress of the depression eased, the Grey Sisters’ involvement in mothercraft education expanded. They ran ‘mother and child exhibitions’; at the one in 1944, over a thousand senior girls from metropolitan schools and convents were taught how to prepare meals, feed and bath the baby, and care for the toddler. They also conducted ‘family life conferences’ in rural areas. O’Connell had long been sympathetic to ‘the mothers of the outback places’ and responded positively in 1942 to B.A. Santamaria’s invitation to the Grey Sisters to play a role in the National Catholic Rural Movement. Conferences were held in Bungaree, Learmonth, Ballarat, Koroit, Lancefield, Romsey and Horsham in the early 1940s.

Unsurprisingly, the Grey Sisters’ maternal education was committed to the prevailing Catholic ideology of the family and to the heavy emphasis on pronatalism emanating from state and medical authorities. In her unpublished manual, ‘Life: Natural and Supernatural’, O’Connell wrote of ‘parenthood’ as ‘the basis of family life’. Nations in which family life had been ‘permitted to decay’ had ‘deteriorated’; married people who avoided having children were ‘mostly dissatisfied’ and often ‘self-centred, nervous and irritable’. Married women who worked outside the home were ‘overstrained’: ‘nerves are jaded and everything jars’. Once children came, motherhood was ‘a whole-time job’. This was a shift in perspective from the 1910s and early 1920s, when she had been focused on the unjust conditions suffered by women in paid work but, as we have seen, O’Connell had never rejected the church’s ideal of family life. It would also seem that O’Connell put more emphasis on fathers helping in the home than other infant health workers. The location of the sisters in the intimate domain of the household gave them a direct access to
fathers that other workers did not have. Oral histories suggest that they tried to get the fathers to help around the house, as well as showing them ‘kindly regard’. Unlike most infant health literature, which was addressed to mothers, their pamphlets in the 1940s were entitled *Wise Parenthood*. Their rural ‘family life conferences’ targeted men, as well as women and girls, with some success; at Learmonth in 1944, more than fifty fathers attended talks entitled, ‘Fathers Are also Parents’ and ‘Is the Father merely the Breadwinner?’ At Bungaree in 1942, the local paper boasted the attendance of nearly a hundred men.

Despite acquiring a large property in Canterbury as a centre for administration, child-care and mothercraft training in 1945, the Company did not grow as anticipated; there were twelve members in 1949 when it finally achieved recognition from Rome. Further, its progress towards papal approval was fraught. The existing histories of the congregation provide some explanation for this, including the role played by William Collins, who, from 1938, began to have doubts about whether O’Connell was ‘suited’ to religious life. He wrote to Archbishop Mannix in 1941 that there had been ‘an accumulation of small incidents’ since that time that had made him change his mind about her ‘as a possible religious’. He may have been referring to the effects of diabetes, which, according to the order’s second historian, Kathleen Kane, at times made her severe and irrational.

O’Connell felt betrayed by the processes of the election, and she and May experienced ‘much mental and physical anguish of soul’ in their last years, shared together at the Company’s property at Croydon. While the details surrounding the processes of O’Connell’s removal are unclear—and are in any case beyond the scope of this essay—some broader themes about religious welfare and women’s leadership in the church emerge from the series of texts that O’Connell and Bannon compiled during the 1950s and early 1960s. Bristling but controlled, these include a three-volume typescript history, a ‘Minority Report’, a ‘Protest’, and a typed bound history catalogued with the Mitchell Library’s printed books. One of O’Connell’s chief grievances was that the ‘unique original nature of the Company’ was being eroded. She thought that there was too much emphasis on the training of ‘secular mothercraft nurses’ and not enough on the spiritual training necessary to elevate the work ‘from the mediocre home-help to a higher vocation’. By 1951, there were 63 members of ‘the Grey Sisters’ family’, of whom the majority were mothercraft nurses.
given to the spiritual development of the sisters, there was nothing to
distinguish their work from ‘simply medical aid or welfare assistance’. In
d this, O’Connell’s regrets were similar to those of many religious charitable
organisations in the post-war years, which had to redefine their mission and
identity in relation to the introduction by the state of a raft of new social
security benefits. Her grand plan to make the Grey Sisters the centre of a
Catholic welfare training centre was overtaken by the rolling tides of
professionalisation and secularisation. In the jostling scene of Melbourne’s
emerging Catholic welfare sector, there was considerable tension between the
older religious orders and the new generation of trained social workers. In
this new welfare scene, the Grey Sisters found a niche but not one that
O’Connell had envisaged or welcomed.

O’Connell thought the loss of the ‘original spirit’ of the Company explained
why they were not attracting many new members. But this, too, is
explicable in broader terms. Although significant numbers of young women
did join religious congregations between 1945 and 1965, the majority entered
teaching orders. Neither missionary orders nor the ‘Brown Sisters’ in
Sydney, who worked with the sick in the own homes, attracted many new
members. Most girls drawn to religious communities, joined teaching
orders they knew.

However, O’Connell’s histories also tell us that she thought her ideas for her
congregation had never been fully understood. She returned frequently to her
original conception of it, stating that she had wanted a new form of active
engagement, requiring a new form of community life, because existing
practices—such as not being allowed to travel singly or stay away over
night—were unsuited to the Company’s work. She saw her group as the most
recent in the long history of women’s congregations whose work had broken
the mould. She cited the Pope’s proclamation that to draw a line between
religion and life was ‘anti-Christian’ and quoted experts such as Father
Thurston S.J., who declared it wrong to put ‘a water-tight compartment
between religion and Social Service’. Writing in the early 1960s, by which
time that archaic model of religious life was being discredited, she saw her
work as having foreshadowed the changes crystallised in the second Vatican
Council. She knew her Company had put into practice in the 1930s the
essence of Cardinal Suenens’ recommendations in his influential text, The
Nun in the World (1962). Indeed, she saw the work of her sisters as more
like that of priests than women religious, as she had told Mannix in the 1940s.
What was needed was ‘a new type of mobile religious association’,
autonomous, independent and working in the community.
For the last fifteen years of her life, Maude O’Connell felt excluded from the Community and was fearful of being expelled; her papers contain letters to Mannix and to the apostolic delegate seeking reassurance that she and May would not be prevented from leading ‘lives of recollection’. Among the papers of the Company, there are two narratives of their final years, each with a different ending. Bannon’s narrative finishes on a positive note, describing a meeting of all the sisters at Croydon in late 1964, which ‘helped to clear many misunderstandings and difficulties. All the sisters were very relieved at the friendly attitude of all to each other’. But there is another unsigned ‘Report’ among the papers in the Mitchell Library, which concludes that, despite Sister O’Connell’s struggles to restore the spirit and unity of the Company, ‘after a long illness Sister Maude O’Connell died and the problem still remains unsolved’. There is no simple narrative closure to the story of Maude O’Connell’s life. The ambivalence evoked by these texts can perhaps be taken to symbolise the continuing ambivalence in the church’s relationship with women.

Conclusion

Maude O’Connell’s life sheds light on the processes by which a woman without much family wealth or support and with limited formal education came to exercise considerable leadership within the labour movement, the mothers and babies movement and the church. It also shows the cost to her personally of exercising that leadership. Her elementary public education taught her numeracy and literacy, enabling her to become a life-long avid reader, but O’Connell was otherwise largely self-taught. Endowed with a quick mind and a talent for organisation, she learnt a great deal by ‘association with people of different ranks and different thinking’, according to Bannon. She could ‘enter into men’s conversations’ and ‘bring her mind in line with the minds of men of high intellect’.

The absence of a mother’s influence in adolescence may well have contributed to the shaping of her gender identity and affected her leadership in contrasting ways. Being less subject to feminine pressure to be ‘lady-like’ may have made her less inhibited about moving in the worlds of men, but it may also have diminished her absorption of social niceties and left her vulnerable to criticism. Her patron, William Collins, described her as ‘abrupt, forthright, undiplomatic’, and May thought ‘it was hard for her to be properly appreciated by men or women’. One (unnamed) priest told Maude he felt sorry for any woman who had been ‘endowed with a man’s mind and a woman’s body’. Leaving aside its essentialism, this comment may speak of
her mentoring. Her rhetorical style—combative, colourful and absolutist—
shows the influence of listening to men in the pulpit and on the hustings. The
combination of humour and stream-of-consciousness in her rambling letters
recalls the story-telling traditions of her Irish forebears. Those who lost
interest in the early days of the Grey Sisters she described as ladies who had
‘flown South [sic] for the winter’, and the old lady who was to have been the
‘respectable and staid Prop of the house’ developed ‘nerves, and a sudden
strange devotion to someone in Ballarat’. It was May Bannon’s arrival in
1930 that stabilised the Company and provided a long and supportive
friendship that enabled Maude’s work to flourish. The conclusion to May’s
memoir is telling of their relationship:

I thank God for my vocation, for the companionship of this courageous
woman. I wish to mention that I benefited by the very close union of
soul and mind during the years at Croydon. My horizon has been very
much widened by suffering disappointment and sorrow.

She wished to mention that she was not a victim of Maude’s illness. On the
contrary, to the last, she had gained from their ‘union’. Nor is there a whiff of
sensitivity about ‘particular friendships’—of which most established
congregations were wary. May’s lack of inhibition may speak in part of her
sheltered life but it also indicates the depth of their friendship.

Maude O’Connell negotiated the structures of power in a church where men
held ultimate authority but where the monastic model gave Superiors within
women’s congregations ultimate authority within their own domain. Like
many women religious in early 20th-century Australia, O’Connell was
appreciated—up to a point—for her virile faith and commitment to action.
Collins said her ‘ruggedness’ appealed to him because only a woman of
‘action and determination, and no respecter of persons’, could have achieved
what she achieved. Her lack of feminine gentility did not prevent him from
supporting her foundation because he was convinced of the sincerity of her
faith. O’Connell was one of a long line of strong women from the time of
Hildegard of Bingen who were able to exercise some autonomy in the church
by convincing powerful men that they had God on their side. While
O’Connell gained Collins’ patronage, it must have rankled. Collins describes
an occasion when he told her she had been ‘impudent’. It is a usage
indicative of the infantilising tendency of the hierarchical model governing
power relations within the church, including women’s congregations.
O’Connell had a genius for leadership and, as Superior, had willingly wielded
the absolute authority invested in her. When, in the end, she was considered
by the priestly hierarchy to be unsuitable, there was nowhere else for her to go.

How can we understand the role of religious faith in her life? Given his penchant for anti-clericalism, Bob Solly’s efforts to honour her trade union work as having religious significance—‘you found souls to save’ and knew that ‘happy Christian homes were needed for the people’—is testimony to her sincerity and to its value in assisting her to move in different worlds.141 Her faith was doubtless the source of much of her strength and may have soothed her ‘nervous temperament’ and ‘restlessness of spirit’. It offered a framework for the sort of militant compassion that she felt need of in her own life. Collins tells us that she and May were inspired by the encyclical, *Nova Impendit*, with its call for ‘a crusade of compassion and love’, when they were surviving on dry bread and black tea at ‘Kewn Kreesther’ in 1931.142 We do not have a record of her reading *Casti Connubii* but her work with mothers was also a response to its proclamation that ‘frustrating the marriage act’ was ‘a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious’.143 Like many women who exercised leadership within the church, Maude O’Connell perpetuated papal teaching while trying to mitigate its consequences.

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3 Mary Bannon, ‘Cecily Mary Maude E. O’Connell’, 4–8, Bannon Papers.
4 ‘Some Biographical Notes on Mother Cecily Maude O’Connell, Foundress of the Company of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament (Grey Sisters)’, 2, ML MSS 1464/1, Grey Sisters Records.
5 Bannon, 8.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 12.
8 ‘Some Biographical Notes’, 3.
9 Bannon, 8.
10 Ibid., 13.


13 Best, 98.

14 Ibid., 91.

15 Ibid., 91.

16 Ibid., 92.

17 Bannon, 13.

18 Best, 91.

19 Ibid., 88 & 92.


21 Best, 97.


23 Kane, The History of the Grey Sisters, 8.


26 Kildea, 124; O’Farrell, 312.

27 Austral Light, June 1916.


29 Close, 132–3.

30 Cited in Close, 134.

31 Sally Kennedy, Faith and Feminism: Catholic Women’s Struggles for Self-expression (Sydney: St Patrick’s College, 1985), 16.

32 Bannon, 10.

33 Woman’s Social Work, 2 April 1917, 7.


36 ‘Some Biographical Notes’, 5.

37 Kennedy, 20.
38 ‘Some Biographical Notes’, 7. In its first issue, this magazine was called Women’s Social Worker but thereafter Woman’s Social Work.

39 Kennedy, 16.

40 Kennedy, 17; Bongiorno, 129.

41 Woman’s Social Work, 2 April 1917, 7.

42 Woman’s Social Work, October 1917; November 1917.

43 Woman’s Social Work, 2 April 1917. This article is unsigned but its views and style have O’Connell’s stamp.

44 Woman’s Social Work, October 1917; November 1917.

45 Cited in Close, 204; cited in Kennedy, 18.

46 Woman’s Social Work, October 1917.

47 Argus, 4 April 1917, 17.

48 Woman’s Social Work, September 1918. Again, this article in unsigned but shows all the signs of Maude O’Connell’s style and ideas.


50 Kennedy, 12–16.

51 Argus, 4 April 1917.

52 Woman’s Social Work, 1 January 1918.

53 Kennedy, 31.

54 Bannon, 14.


57 Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, Marian Quartly, Creating a Nation (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1994), 235.


59 Letter from William Collins to Maude O’Connell, 15 June 1933, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.

60 Cited in Edman, 173.


62 Cited in Edman, 171.

63 Cited in Kane, The History of the Grey Sisters, 43.

64 Collins, 4.


67 Collins, 5.

68 Cited in Edman, 74.

69 Collins, 4; Report of the Select Committee on Child Endowment together with the Minutes of Evidence, Minutes of Evidence, Cecily Maude Mary O’Connell, 125, VPRS 11879, Public Record Office of Victoria.

70 Collins, 5–6.
74 Collins, 15–16.
75 Edman, 172.
76 Kane, *The History of the Grey Sisters*, 34.
77 Collins, 19.
78 Ibid., 24
80 *Argus*, 14 May 1934.
81 The Little Company of our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, 1 July 1933 – 30 June, 1934, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.
82 Newscuttings, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers; also *Argus*, 16 October 1936, and 10 December 1938.
83 *Rural Life*, 17 August 1940.
84 Kane, *The History of the Grey Sisters*, 52 & 60; *Argus*, 13 May 1935.
85 Cited in Newscuttings, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.
86 Collins, 16.
87 Ibid., 9 & 27.
88 Ibid., 16–19.
90 Newscuttings, no name or date, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.
93 Letter from William Collins to Maude O’Connell, 15 June 1933, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.
94 *Report Select Committee on Child Endowment*, Minutes of Evidence, 130.
96 ‘Rule of Life’, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.
98 Bannon, 42.
99 Bannon, 47; *Report Select Committee on Child Endowment*, Minutes of Evidence, 128.
100 *Report Select Committee on Child Endowment*, Minutes of Evidence, 130.
101 Bannon, 10.
Newscuttings, no name or date, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.


Ibid., 95.

Ibid., 95–118.

Bannon, 60.


*Argus*, 30 November 1951.

Letter from M. O’Connell to The Apostolic Delegate, 27 March 1957, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Papers.


Mary O’Connell, *Our Lady of Coogee: Eileen O’Connor and the Founding of Sydney’s Brown Nurses* (Sydney: Crossing Press, 2009), 182.


Bannon, 60.

‘Reports to Restore the Spirit of Unity within the Company’, 229, Grey Sisters Records.

There is very little about her relationships with her family after she was sent to Melbourne in the papers in ML or SLV. However, her initial connection with Daylesford was through her sister, so she was not estranged from her sister, nor probably from any of her other siblings, but they appear not to have played much of a role in her life story.

Bannon, 8.

Ibid.

Collins, *The Early Years*, 5; Bannon, 9.

Bannon.

Cited in Collins, *The Early Years*, 9

Bannon, 63.


Ibid., 203–07.
139 Collins, *The Early Years*, 10–11.
140 Ibid., 11.
142 Collins, *The Early Years*, 41.