

dictée par les décisions de l'État. Il reste que l'objectif que s'était donné l'auteur est atteint : « suggérer des questions et des pistes pour des recherches qui devront faire appel à d'autres types de sources » (p. 20).

Andrée Dufour
Département de sciences humaines
Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu.

Elizabeth Rapley. *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

A Social History of the Cloister examines the organization and religious life of three congregations of nuns—the Ursulines, the Congregation de Notre Dame, and the Compagnie de Marie Notre Dame—from their foundations c1600 to the Revolution. These orders represented a new hybrid form of community. Like earlier nuns, these lived in cloisters (*clausara*) and spent much of their time in prayer and meditation. They added an apostolic and social mission of teaching young girls rudimentary reading and writing through catechetical study. Rapley describes both the “exoskeleton of *clausara*,” which physically shielded the nuns from the secular, and “the endoskeleton of the Rule and constitutions, which defined all the functions of the community” and necessary relations with the outside world (p. 112).

Rapley sensitively considers the pillars of monasticism—vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—the noviciate, the *pensionnat*, and attitudes to death and dying. Unlike those in the maligned rich abbeys that anti-clericals pretended were typical, most nuns lived in poverty, admittedly in an age in which most people lived at subsistence levels. Starvation diets and straw pallets in cold, ruined houses were their lot. Religious fervour sustained them, for most were not just believers but zealots during an age of religious revival following the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century. They were extraordinary women, standing up to bishops and city fathers at a time when women had little role in public life. Vocations did not make saints, however. Jealousies and jockeying for position within the convents was routine. These

good nuns slandered each other, other communities, and anyone who stood in the way of God's will. Zealots prayed for the death of those in the secular world who opposed their God-ordained mission. This part of the book makes an important contribution to the history both of women and of popular religion.

Of special interest to readers of this journal is Rapley's analysis of their contribution to the schooling of girls—which constitutes Part One of the book. She situates her discussion within a historiography begun by Dominique Julia and others in the 1970s that recognized that the schooling of girls in France began as a Catholic response to the success of the Huguenots. Its purpose was the re-catholicization of France, not by prayer but by the social means of schools. “‘The teaching function is the prime purpose of our institute, for the greater glory of God, for the salvation of souls and the public good,’ stated the Rule of the Compagnie de Notre Dame” (p. 15). The last purpose was a revolutionary departure for religious congregations who would now serve the world rather than withdrawing from it.

From three religious houses in 1610, five hundred loosely associated ones peppered France by 1670. Every town had a convent of teaching nuns, although rural areas remained unserved. This spread was due to a religious revival among the aristocracy, often tied to political disputes with Huguenots. Aristocratic families gave financial support—buildings, donations, and dowries—and their children to the new communities. Nuns of the seventeenth century were primarily daughters of elites, although the congregations democratized in the eighteenth century. Dowries, meant to support a nun for life, provided the financial base.

Once established, schools had little difficulty attracting students. A thirst for schooling existed that refutes the notion of social resistance to schooling. Despite a plethora of work showing this response through the nineteenth century, “social resistance” with state as saviour still afflicts historiography. The spread of schooling in the seventeenth century was the first step in the development of a French educational system and the alphabetization of France. In the mid-nineteenth century another group of remarkable women would reinvigorate girls' schooling. The nuns of the nineteenth century would go into the world to establish schools rather than bringing young girls into the convent. Rather than an obscurant church opposed to schooling, as republicans liked to claim, the church provided schooling for the majority of girls in France until the 1880s. The educational

system of France culminated with the Ferry Laws that secularized a pre-existing network of schools built by independent efforts.¹

Rapley's primary research is impressive. She has culled information from about seventy-five internal histories of local houses and from the Orders' archives. Anecdotes bring these nuns back to life. The archival sources have also permitted a remarkable reconstruction of the financial state of the congregations and a revisionist explanation of their troubles of the eighteenth century. Religious devotion, political disputes with Protestants, and an economic recovery in the seventeenth century contributed to the spread of congregations. The very success of these determined women in a male-dominated society laid the seeds for a decline of one-third of their membership, 1720-1789, especially during the 1720s. Space in the walled cities was precious. Every new convent and addition or garden took space from someone else and, because the Church enjoyed tax exemptions, lowered a city's tax base. Donations they raised might have gone to local churches or to a bishop. Dowries meant a permanent loss of family wealth. Officials had many reasons to resent their success.

When the monarchy blundered into one war after another, financial ministers, including Cardinal Richelieu, sought to raise taxes or tap untaxed sources like the congregations. The taxation problem ultimately destroyed the Ancien Régime. To make brief a complex story that Rapley makes easy to understand, the State's attempt to collect back taxes (*amortissements*) from 1689, an economic collapse following the John Law bubble of 1720, and physiocrats' demographic theories concerning productivity put the congregations in severe financial straits at the very time that elites, exposed to the writing of Enlightenment *philosophes*, were becoming more secular. The state restricted the number of novices to reduce "the excessive number of women's congregations." The nuns suffered "guilt by association" as anticlericalism grew. Thus the restrictions on congregations during the Revolution in 1790 can be reinterpreted

1 François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge University Press, 1982 [orig. 1977]); Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au féminin: Les Congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1989); Raymond Grew and Patrick Harrigan, *School, State, and Society: The Growth of Elementary Schooling in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1991).

as continuity rather than a sharp break with the Ancien Régime. Superiors by mid eighteenth century had to manage finances carefully. The success or failure of a congregation often depended on the financial acumen of the Superior. These were the first businesswomen of France.

Rapley's dating of the decline of women's congregations to the first half of the eighteenth century has major historiographical implications. The decline of monasteries is usually dated in the last two decades before the Revolution as a result of rising secularism in society and in the monasteries themselves. But this interpretation has been based on statistics for males. Rapley's evidence shows that the decline in number of nuns was externally mandated and causally quite distinct from whatever affected monks.

One puzzle arises from this revised chronology. Given vibrancy in the seventeenth century and decline in the eighteenth, why was female literacy fourteen per cent in 1700 and twenty-nine per cent in 1789, as estimated by Furet and Ozouf? Perhaps some recourse to the many French *thèses* of Departments and regions would have given a clue. The author might have stressed that these nuns, unlike those of the nineteenth century, emphasized reading, to inculcate the message, over writing, which permits individual expression.

A Social History of the Cloister is simply an excellent book—sensitive, imaginative, and clearly written. It is a major contribution to the history of education, religion, and women.

Patrick J. Harrigan
University of Waterloo

Jean O'Grady and Goldwin French, eds. *Northrop Frye's Writings on Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. Pp. lii, 684.

"The aim of education" is "to make people maladjusted." It is "to destroy their notions that what society" does makes "sense, and that they ha[ve] only to conform to it to make sense of their own lives." For Northrop Frye, conformity and adjustment are to education what disease is to health. Frye has been subject to more caricature, misrepresentation, and belittlement than any