

# Heritage at the heart of Cork

PHOTO: JOANNA MOORHEAD

**Joanna Moorhead** reports from Ireland on the unlikely winner of one of 2022's most prestigious international awards

**I**T'S A SMALL museum tucked away on a side street in Ireland, and it focuses on the life of an eighteenth-century nun. But if that makes Nano Nagle Place in Cork sound like a backwater of a visitor attraction, think again. As well as being named Museum of the Year 2022 by the Council of Europe, it's in the top 10 per cent of museums worldwide reviewed on Trip Advisor. "It's quite astonishing," says Agnes O'Sullivan, who is a big part of why this former convent has risen to these dizzy heights: a brilliant ambassador, full of lively stories about Nano, and with an infectious enthusiasm for her do-gooding.

And there was plenty of good that needed doing in Cork in the 1750s. Despite it being the home of many flourishing industries – textiles, tanning, brewing and distilling among them – and an important port, the city harboured a huge amount of poverty. Hardest hit were the Catholics: this was the time of the Penal Laws, ushered in by William of Orange a few decades earlier, and those who stuck by the Church of Rome were barred from entering the professions, from buying or inheriting land from Protestants and, perhaps most insidiously, from teaching or running schools. Families with children were among the most downtrodden of all. Unsurprisingly, the poverty bred other problems: drunkenness, violence, robbery and disorderliness were rampant.

**SO WHEN** a well-to-do 30-something woman arrived into this hellhole from a glamorous life in Paris, you'd have thought she'd have turned straight round and returned to France. Honora Nagle – known to all by her family nickname of Nano – had been born in County Cork but, like other offspring of wealthier Irish Catholics, she was sent abroad to be educated; and after leaving school, she sensibly stayed put in France. But the deaths of her parents brought her back: and, having buried them, she decided to stay in Cork and dedicate her life to improving conditions there. Nagle was quick to grasp that the key to any kind of change was education: and though setting up schools for Catholic children was an offence for which she could have been sent to prison,



that's exactly what she did. When she needed more help to run the schools, she called on the Ursulines in France; and when that didn't work out (the Ursulines were enclosed so couldn't go out to teach) she founded her own order, the Presentation Sisters, eventually becoming a nun herself at the age of 57.

The Presentation Sisters would go on to run schools across the world, and to educate many more generations of Cork children: Agnes O'Sullivan was one of them, and amid the displays in what used to be the nuns' chapel there's a photo of her on her First Communion day in 1970.

The convent in Cork continued to function as a religious house until 2006, when the school closed, by which time the number of nuns was

Icon of Nano Nagle by Desmond Kyne, commissioned to mark the bicentenary of her death in 1984

whittling away. But rather than see the place sold and Nagle's legacy swallowed up by a new development, Presentation sisters across the world decided to fundraise to turn the place into a museum, at a cost of around €10 million. They could hardly have imagined, when it opened its doors in 2017, that five years later the president of the EU Museum Forum, Jette Sandahl, would be praising how it "epitomises everything that museums can do and can be".

So what's the secret to its stunning success? First of all, the space has been sensitively and engagingly reimaged: it already had plenty



of large rooms, and these are exceptionally well used, with relics of the convent past – the altar, windows, nuns' choir stalls etc – all folded into the display areas. The garden has been brilliantly wilded, and lit up in the dark; and set within the garden there's an award-winning restaurant serving sustainably produced food.

But the real ace at Nano Nagle Place is the way past and present are intertwined: because although there are now only a handful of Presentation nuns there, their work continues to live on in all sorts of vibrant and important ways. At the heart of the complex of buildings is a centre for migrants: it's been going since before the convent closed in 2006, when the nuns and their supporters worked with the Filipino community who came to the city. Since then they've catered for Eastern Europeans, Africans, Asians and, most recently, Ukrainians. "More than anything, it's a safe space for people who need to know there's somewhere they can go," says Agnes O'Sullivan. The Lantern Project (Nagle carried a lantern on her forays into the city's poorest communities, hence the name) runs activities and events for people who are vulnerable and/or fragile for any reason whatsoever, helping to give them the welcome and experiences that prevent them from feeling isolated and marginalised. "Inclusion" is a word you hear a lot at Nano Nagle Place: all are welcome within its precincts, says O'Sullivan, and the ambition is that anyone and everyone can feel safe and nurtured here.

**FILMS DOTTED** around the museum describe these contemporary elements of Nano Nagle Place: as well as the Migrants' Centre and the Lantern Project, it's the base for a thriving men's group. The men involved are, like the others being helped, vulnerable but capable of getting so much more out of life with care and support. "The whole idea with the men's group is that it's run without judgement and without pressure," says O'Sullivan. The sort of people might have changed, but Nano Nagle Place is still caring for them as she would have wanted to do: the museum is a tribute to her living legacy as well as to her own life and deeds.

There's still an educational element to Nano Nagle Place, albeit very different from the original school: University College Cork's school of architecture is run from the premises, which folds a shiny, cutting-edge element of newness into the centre. Another area of what was once the convent is a social housing complex. All of which means there's a big mix of people on the premises: museum visitors mingle with students and researchers, migrants and community workers, nuns and residents.

Nano Nagle died here on 26 April 1784, aged 65. In 2013 she was declared Venerable by Pope Francis, and there's now a postulator for her cause working towards her canonisation in Rome. She's buried in the museum's garden, in a glass-encased tomb above ground, with a small door through which visitors can, should they choose, put a hand on her coffin. The spirit of Nano Nagle lives on, in the corner of Ireland she made her own, and beyond.