

Martin, Helen (Mary Gabriel)

by Deirdre Bryan

Martin, Helen (Mary Gabriel) (c.1610–1673), founder and first abbess of the Poor Clare convent in Galway, was born in Galway. Although her exact parentage is unknown, the Martins were one of twelve Old English catholic mercantile and gentry families of Galway city, historically known as the tribes of Galway. She was among the first four postulants, all from Galway, to arrive at the Bethlehem convent of the Poor Clares near Athlone, Co. Westmeath, shortly after its foundation in 1631. The convent was built on land donated by the family of the community's founder and abbess, Cecily Dillon (qv), after the nuns had been forced to flee Dublin in 1630. Martin received the habit on 24 March 1632 and was professed on 25 March 1633, taking the religious name of Sister Mary Gabriel.

Following the outbreak of rebellion in October 1641, the sisters, concerned for their security, left the Bethlehem convent and sought refuge with relatives and friends. A number decided to go to Galway, where the sisters had many supporters and where, because of the fortified nature of the city, they would be protected from military attack. In January 1642 Martin, accompanied by twelve professed sisters and two novices, arrived in Galway and established a convent in the vicinity of the present-day St Augustine Street and Queen Street. A decree granting the Poor Clares permission to found the convent was issued by the provincial, Anthony MacGeoghegan (qv), on 30 January 1642.

Martin was elected as the community's first abbess, a position she retained until 1647. In 1649 the Poor Clares received approval from Galway corporation to build a convent on the southern island of Oileán Ealtanach, later known as Nun's Island, with a proviso that they create an access route between the two islands. The sisters remained there until Cromwell issued an edict in 1653 compelling nuns 'to marry or leave the country' (Concannon, 50). While many Irish Poor Clares, including their founder, Cecily Dillon, fled to Spain that year, the Galway nuns remained in the county, living as a secret community. Though Martin and a small band of nuns returned to Nun's Island after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the Poor Clares were not permitted to return openly to the convent until 1825. Martin died, aged sixty-three, on 14 January 1673, and was buried in the cemetery of the abbey of St Francis in Galway.

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*The Poor Clare tercentenary record, 1629–1929* (1929); Mrs T. (Helena) Concannon, *The Poor Clares in Ireland, A.D. 1629–A.D. 1929* (1929); Brendan Jennings, 'The abbey of St. Francis, Galway', *Galway Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xxii (1947),

119; Celsus O'Brien, *Poor Clares, Galway, 1642–1992* (1992); Celsus O'Brien, *The story of the Poor Clares* (1992), 57; *Recollections of an Irish Poor Clare in the seventeenth century: Mother Mary Bonaventure Browne, third abbess of Galway, 1647–1670*, ed. C. O'Brien (1993); Gerard Moran (ed.), *Galway: history and society* (1996), 178, 319–73; *ODNB*

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