In response to its continuing loss of temporal power from late in the eighteenth century, the Catholic Church became involved in reasserting its spiritual authority around the world. As part of this project, the Church insisted it had the right to organize its own schools, staff them with its own appointees and teach distinctively denominational doctrine. Heavily represented amongst the personnel involved were members of religious teaching orders, including members of orders established in Ireland. These new Catholic religious teaching orders, founded and run by middle-class men and women in Ireland, played their part alongside long-established orders and the diocesan colleges in the spread and consolidation of official Catholic doctrine, and in the associated process of class formation and class consolidation through using schools for ‘the imposition of bourgeois values and beliefs on the lower classes’.¹

The principal male Irish teaching order was the Irish Christian Brothers, established in 1802 by Edmund Rice, a Waterford City-based middle-class merchant who made his fortune on the Waterford–Newfoundland provisions’ trade.² Officially called the Congregation of Christian Brothers, the order quickly became known in Ireland simply as the Christian Brothers. This nomenclature sometimes causes confusion, particularly in the USA, where the De La Salle Brothers are often also known locally as the Christian Brothers. Consequently, this chapter refers to the Congregation of Christian Brothers as the Irish Christian Brothers.

Rice’s first school was a converted stable in Waterford and opened in 1802, with a second school opening to cater for increasing enrolments. The following year, in 1803, the existing schools were relocated to a new educational complex in the city termed ‘Mount Sion’. In 1820, the order was established as a pontifical order, which meant that it was answerable
directly to Rome rather than to a local diocesan bishop. A group of brothers, later to be known as the Presentation Brothers, however, preferred the latter option, and still exist today, albeit now as a pontifical order also.

New schools were soon opened in Carrick-on-Suir, Dungarvan, Cork, Dublin and Limerick. Later, the order spread to many provincial towns. Eventually, it became known for its provision of primary schools, secondary schools, technical schools and orphanages, and for its school for the deaf. Also, it spread to England, Australia, New Zealand, Gibraltar, Italy, the USA and Uruguay. The order also ran its own teacher-training college for primary schoolteachers at Marino in Dublin. All teaching brothers were expected to attend this college initially, even if some later went on to study for university degrees and take out university qualifications, primarily through attendance at the colleges of the NUI, to qualify them to teach in secondary schools.

Specifically regarding secondary schools in Ireland in the decades leading up to the announcement of the introduction of free education in 1967, the schools of the Irish Christian Brothers at all times constituted the largest group of Catholic schools for boys. In 1930, they had 64 secondary schools catering for 8,067 pupils. The next largest group, as already pointed out, consisted of the diocesan colleges, the 28 of which catered for 3,377 pupils. Also, while the number of secondary schools in the State run by religious orders of priests, brothers and nuns increased from 255 to 353 between 1941 and 1956, in the case of boys’ schools, it was brought about primarily by the Irish Christian Brothers. Also, the increase continued from the mid-1950s into the early 1960s; the number of Irish Christian Brothers’ secondary schools increased from 66 to 74 between 1957 and 1962.

Like the diocesan colleges, the majority of the Irish Christian Brothers’ schools (CBSs) emphasized Gaelic games in the decades following Independence, holding that this was an essential element in the development of Gaelic civilization in Ireland. They also placed great emphasis on the teaching of the Irish language. Furthermore, a large proportion of schools in the country using Irish as the medium of instruction were schools of the order. At the same time, it is often overlooked that a small number of Irish CBSs catered for the better off sectors of Irish society and displayed their distinctiveness by promoting rugby, a game otherwise associated with Protestant schools and the elite Catholic schools. Amongst the schools of the order in this category were Christians College in Cork, Waterpark College in Waterford, and Christian Brothers’ College Monkstown, in Dublin.