Sister Mary Margaret Cahill was born in Dublin on 10 May 1793. Her father became prosperous as a glover. To support his daughter entering religious life, her father, Mr Cahill, sold a half share in his shop to provide her an allowance. (Women entering religious life often had to bring enough money to support them for life). She was described as dignified, courteous and kind.

Margaret Cahill entered the Congregation on 21 April 1819, was received as a novice on 10 October 1819 and had Mary Aikenhead as her novice mistress. A biography of Mary Aikenhead published in 1924 reported that: ‘It was often said of the old Sisters who had been her [Aikenhead’s] novices, that if the rule book was lost they would be living exponents of everything contained in it’. Cahill was professed on 10 October 1821 and then her main tasks were to visit and instruct prisoners in Ireland. She would also have been amongst the group of Sisters in Ireland who worked courageously to care for the sick during the terrible cholera epidemics in Ireland during the early 1830s.

It was probably her particular interest in prison ministry that led Cahill to be the first to volunteer for the Australian mission when Mary Aikenhead called for volunteers. She was forty-five years of age, the oldest of the pioneer Sisters.

With the other four pioneer Sisters and their companion, Dr William Ullathorne, Cahill set sail from Kingston Harbour, England, on the Francis Spaight on 18 August 1838. The journey to Sydney was to take four and a half months on the ocean with no stopping at any port. They arrived in Sydney, New South Wales on 31 December 1838.

The Sisters lived in difficult circumstances and some young Sisters died partly because of their poor living conditions. John Cahill wrote, ‘Every day seems Lent for us.’ They could not afford butter for breakfast and every day they observed the fasting normally only practised during Lent. Cahill worked with the prisoners in Parramatta and with De Lacy to organise the Orphan School in Sydney. She gave religious instruction on Sundays and was a good teacher with a musical voice and a way with words.

As the oldest of the group, Cahill would have thought of herself as the guardian of Mary Aikenhead’s spirit in this new land. A good example of this is when Cahill refused the payment offered by Downing Street to the Sisters as she saw this as going against the Sisters’ constitutions, which ordained: ‘All must remember who are under the obedience of the Congregation that whatever is done in the service of the sick poor must be done gratis [freely], not demanding nor accepting any retribution or alms by which any of the duties in which, according to the institute, they are employed, may seem to be recompensed’.

In 1847, John Cahill was one of three pioneer Sisters who left Sydney and sailed to Hobart. The Sisters were welcomed there by Bishop Robert Willson. During her time in Van Diemen’s Land, she regularly gave religious instruction to a crowded audience. The Sisters also visited the Cascades Female Factory spending time with prisoners.

A portrait painted of Cahill shows her dark, piercing eyes looking over her spectacles and the slender hands grasping the prayer book. Despite her stern appearance, she was described as having a cheerful countenance.

Having died in Hobart on 13 April 1864 at the age of seventy-one, Cahill is buried in the Hobart Cemetery at Cornelian Bay with the two other pioneers who went to Van Diemen’s Land in 1847.