Catherine Henrietta O’Brien was born on 1 June 1809 into a well-to-do family. She was educated in France. Catherine had a vast network of relations in Ireland. A cousin whose letters told of events concerning the Sisters in 1846 and 1847 was Roger Therry, prominent in society and Catholic affairs in Australia. As an heiress, with her father and four sisters dead, and her mother incapacitated by an accident, O’Brien and her sister were wards of Lord Clifford, who prevented her from staying with the Sisters of Charity when she first joined them at the age of eighteen.

Catherine was described as beautiful, charming and refined after her education in France. She finally entered the novitiate at Stanhope Street, Dublin, on 30 August 1830, and received the habit on 11 March 1831, being given Francis de Sales as her religious name. As a novice she was ready to stand with the poor and suffering, begging Mary Aikenhead to allow her to accompany the professed Sisters to the hospitals during the deadly cholera outbreaks in the 1830s. She was professed on 29 August 1834.

Both O’Brien and Cahill had the advantage of the Jesuit Father Kenny’s instruction in the novitiate in Ireland and were adept at instructing others. Before the opening of St Vincent’s Hospital, Dublin, Mary Aikenhead sent O’Brien and two other Sisters to Paris to learn all aspects of nursing and hospital administration from the Hospitalières de Saint Thomas. O’Brien, was recognised for her teaching skills as was Lawrence Cater also. The English Government offered to pay a stipend for her to teach in the NSW Colony.

Like the other Sisters who volunteered to come to the Australian Mission, O’Brien left England in August 1838, being twenty-nine years of age when she arrived in Sydney. Among the problems for the Sisters in the unfamiliar environment of Sydney were the heat and the mosquitoes. Bishop Polding, reported that O’Brien ‘suffered no little’ with these.

As head superior of the Parramatta community, she came under pressure from Dr Gregory to adopt the Benedictine rule (Dr Gregory but, with the support of Cahill) and Williams, she chose instead to relocate to Hobart to continue working within the Sisters of Charity Constitutions.

In Hobart O’Brien helped the downtrodden in the gaols, visited the orphans, taught at St Joseph’s School and nursed the poor.

O’Brien was never strong and generally in poor health. She died in Hobart on 6 November, 1871 and is buried at Cornelian Bay.