Liesbeth Corens, *Confessional Mobility and English Catholics in Counter-Reformation Europe*


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REFERENCES

Over the last twenty years, there has been a surge in research exploring early modern English and Irish Catholicism in exile on the Continent. Complementing the seminal in-depth studies of Catholicism at home, produced by John Bossy or, more recently, by Michael Questier, the pioneering works of scholars such as Claire Walker or Caroline Bowden opened up new avenues in the study of exiled English and Irish nuns, a field which remained nearly unexplored till then. The Who Were the Nuns? project produced an invaluable database recording the particular details of all known nuns abroad, as well as several volumes of edited primary sources and edited collections of essays. It then spurred associated scholars to produce several monographs documenting and analysing a variety of aspects of religious life for women in Continental convents. A little later, the superb Monks in Motion project produced equally stimulating scholarship on male religious Orders, and opened up exciting avenues for further research.

Those new lines of investigation have made a great contribution to the history of early modern Catholicism and revealed much which was so far unknown about the practical ways in which religious expatriates managed their communities in exile, how they viewed the politics of the home country from afar, but also on how they lived their spirituality and how they situated themselves in the broader context of the Roman Catholic Church. These studies complement earlier ones, which dealt with influential families, stately homes and recusant networks, and their relationships with the mission in England. Yet this eminent body of work, so far, did relatively little to inform readers about the lay English Catholics abroad.

This is one of the things Liesbeth Corens’s book aims to rectify; Confessional Mobility uses an impressive variety of primary sources to document the many modes of experience open to English Catholic travellers on the Continent, both clergy and laity. The author explains the usefulness of the term ‘confessional mobility’ as a broad umbrella term which goes beyond the stasis and permanence implied in the term ‘exile’, to suggest a more dynamic mobility. It also avoids the sense of victimhood conveyed by the term ‘refugee’, used by Guilday. The notion of confessional mobility embraces the multifarious nature of English Catholic mobility on the Continent. People travelled for different reasons, for different lengths of time, and this diversity is illustrated in the structure the author chose for her book, which is conceptual rather than merely chronological.

Part I, ‘Distance’, explores two modes of Catholic life abroad, with ‘The Exile’, ‘The Fugitive’. In this section, Liesbeth Corens dwells upon the ways in which English Catholics on the Continent construed and negotiated the distance which separated
them from their country, and how they continued to feel part of the English Catholic community despite that distance. Part II, ‘Mobility’, presents ‘The Educational Traveller’ and ‘The Pilgrim’, showing life abroad as a transformative experience, as one journeyed not only through geographical space but also through one’s own life journey. Part III, ‘Orientation’, introduces ‘The Intercessor’ and ‘The Record Keeper’, placing English Catholics within the context of the broader Church, and discussing the extent and limits of their assimilation and integration.

In ‘The Pilgrim’, there may be some confusion about the site of the Jesus Oak, but each chapter tells a cogent story, and develops a truly notional analysis, whilst offering rich insights into English Catholic experience on the Continent. Corens’s love and knowledge of archives is particularly palpable in her last chapter, ‘The Record Keeper’, in which she engagingly tackles the questions of reputation and memory in the selection processes which preside over the gathering of archives and collections. Like all others, English Catholic documents were kept or discarded in order to create a particular image of the overall cause, making those collections ‘history in the making’ (188).

Some readers may be surprised by the fact that the book, whose title announces a study of the ‘Counter Reformation’ period, in fact deals with post-Restoration Catholicism; some will expect the material to deal with earlier decades. Yet the choice of periodization makes sense in the economy of this monograph, which strives to demonstrate that post-1660 Catholicism was vibrant and dynamic, and that its depiction as somewhat lacking in energy (compared to its pre-1640s predecessor) can be challenged. The author also argues that English Catholicism in that period is not to be construed as either at home or abroad, but rather as a community without borders, in constant movement, interacting equally with its English and its Continental allies.

On the subject of sources, Liesbeth Corens is to be applauded in her decision to open up her rich bibliography to studies outside the English language, to include scholarly publications in Dutch, in French and in German, which are too often ignored. I noticed one unfortunate mistake, where a German article is attributed to Caroline Bowden when its author is Bettina Braun. Also, when citing one of the volumes of a multi-volume edition of primary sources such as English Convents in Exile, for instance, it would perhaps have been clearer to cite the editor of the volume in question, rather than the general editor of the series.

Interestingly, the book chooses not to dwell upon the tensions and divisions which opposed various modes of English Catholic belief and practice at the time. In its holistic approach, it focuses on belonging rather than discordance. Yet it has a different approach when it comes to historiography, in which it evokes several major fault lines or blind spots. This monograph repeatedly stakes its claim to originality and indeed, it does offer both new material and new approaches. Yet I would suggest that earlier studies in the field, such as those by Beales, Bossy, Guilday and others, should not be dismissed as short-sighted or out-dated. Much in the same way as the author calls for a consideration of a early modern English Catholicism without borders, in which interaction is key, we could also consider the study of that field as a community of continued debate, in which each voice has its place and time. Confessional Mobility is an excellent example of this; building as it does upon an impressive range of sources and scholarly works, it is a welcome addition to an already vibrant field of study, and an engaging read.
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