

Confessional Mobility and English Catholics in Counter-Reformation Europe

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The renewed focus of many historians on post-Reformation English Catholicism in the last few decades has meant that the expatriate English Catholic community in Continental Europe, which produced and preserved many of the records of the English Catholic community, is often a main source of evidence. The growth of interest in post-Reformation English female religious has also focussed attention on one part of this community. Yet there has not existed, until now, a coherent and up-to-date theoretical framework in which to make sense of the complex identities of English Catholics living permanently or temporarily outside England. Liesbeth Corens makes a major contribution to the historiography of early modern English Catholicism by providing that theoretical underpinning in this significant book, whose conclusions will inform the future study of Counter-Reformation Catholicism in general, and indeed all research into the phenomenon of ‘confessional mobility’.

The concept of ‘confessional mobility’, the idea that people might move from one country to another for confessional reasons, is central to Corens’s argument and takes the place of the older, loaded term ‘exile’. Corens argues persuasively that ‘exile’ is a limiting and pejorative term, not least because many English Catholics actively chose to live abroad for positive reasons, and substitutes ‘confessional mobility’ for the on the grounds that Catholics travelled and lived abroad for a multiplicity of reasons. In addition, the idea of ‘exile’ is tied to anachronistic perceptions of ‘static nation states’ that simply did not exist for early modern people (pp. 2–3).

The focus of Corens’s study is ‘a community without borders that bridged the Channel’ (p. 3), primarily in the period between the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and the 1720s, a decade in which public interest declined in applying the penal laws against Catholics in England. The book thus addresses a hitherto rather neglected period in English Catholic confessional mobility, in contrast to the more thoroughly studied Elizabethan era. Corens perceives a shift in the English Catholic community during the period in question from the centrality of confessionally mobile clergy and religious to confessionally mobile lay people (p. 7), and challenges the idea that the influence of the Catholic community on England declined in importance after 1660 (p. 9). Corens examines confessional mobility in relation to three central concepts: geographical

and psychological distance from England; mobility; and orientation. Within this overarching framework, Corens examines confessionally mobile Catholics via six different paradigms: exiles who chose or were compelled to live abroad; fugitives who were forced to live abroad because they were pursued by the authorities in England for their involvement in the Catholic cause; educational travellers who chose to visit the Continent to improve themselves; pilgrims; 'intercessors', who included English religious maintaining devotional life; and the record keepers who preserved the collective memory of the Catholic community abroad.

The immense scale of the author's achievement is evident in the fact that 'no clear-cut body of source material' exists for the study of confessionally mobile English Catholics (p. 2), and the depth and breadth of Corens's archival work for this volume is exceptional. The book avowedly challenges stereotypes of English Catholics as isolated and victimised (p. 17), and Corens makes the important observation that 'exile' narratives were less meaningful to English Catholics after 1558 than they were to dislocated English Protestants during Queen Mary's reign (p. 24). While Protestant exiles tended to identify with the Hebrews of the Book of Exodus, Catholics, by contrast, identified themselves with the apostles and early missionaries, especially missionaries to England (p. 28). Since their membership of a universal church mattered more to English Catholics than their national identity – and this order of priorities was often what made people identify with Catholicism in the first place – Catholics did not see themselves as a people displaced from the Promised Land, but rather as potential saviours of a kingdom fallen into heresy. The popularity of plays about early English missionary saints such as St Chad at English Jesuit colleges underlined the importance of eremitic figures dislocated from their nation of origin to the self-understanding of many English Catholics living abroad (p. 32).

In spite of their Catholicism, which implied allegiance to Christendom in general rather than any specifically 'national' expression of the Christian faith, expatriate Catholics nevertheless took pains to perpetuate specifically English expressions of the Catholic faith such as the relics and cults of English saints. The absence of shrines and the dispersed nature of relics created a challenge to these cults that produced creative responses such as an emphasis on detailed hagiography (pp. 33–4). The fact that some English saints, such as St Boniface, were venerated as much in Continental Europe as in England assisted the acceptance and patronage of expatriate English Catholics (pp. 35–6), showing the extent to which English and Continental expressions of Catholicism were already intrinsically intertwined, even before any conscious effort to emphasise those connections. Corens notes that for Thomas Stapleton and later English expatriate theologians, mission was just as important as martyrs and miracles for identifying the true church (p. 42–4), bolstering her case that the English Catholic community should be seen as would-be missionaries and apostles rather than victims (p. 47). Their status as missionaries empowered Catholics, placing them in a long line of English apostles, and gave them a defined place in the global Catholic Church even when their home nation had become a hostile place.

In her chapter on English Catholics abroad as fugitives, Corens questions the traditional interpretation of Catholics travelling beyond seas as a politically subversive act in and of itself, drawing attention to the extent to which Catholics formally outlawed in England often negotiated a relationship with the English crown and with their home country (pp. 48–9). The case of Thomas Rookwood, the brother of a man who was executed for attempting to assassinate William of Orange in 1696, is just one example of the ways in which fugitives tried to define themselves in creative ways. Rookwood argued that his absence from England was an act of obedience and submission to the crown (pp. 73–4). Corens argues that the ways in which fugitives managed to retain a relationship with their home country challenges outdated perceptions of the early modern state as exclusively territorial, drawing attention instead to a juridical conception of 'portable' subjecthood, similar to the strong feelings of nationality that English Catholics retained in spite of prolonged – sometimes even multi-generational – periods of settlement in Continental Europe.

Corens redefines the 'educational project' of English Catholic travellers to Continental Europe in positive terms, seeing them not as refugees from Protestant England, but rather as seekers after a broader educational experience (pp. 79–80). She analyses the educational experience of English Catholics abroad within the

contexts of spiritual retreat and personal growth, as well as preparation for a lay apostolate. The popularity of the 18th-century Grand Tour added a further dimension, and Corens shows that English Catholic gentry travellers were key participants in this cultural trend, which has hitherto been approached primarily as an English Protestant encounter with Catholic southern Europe. Catholic priests acting as tutors frequently acted as guides on the Grand Tour, which gave an opportunity for English Catholics to experience the heartlands of the Counter-Reformation, yet participation in this cultural trend also (paradoxically) aligned Catholics with their Protestant neighbours and helped to integrate them into the wider English gentry experience (p. 103).

In her study of English Catholic expatriates as pilgrims, Corens seeks to shift perspective 'from the individual, static shrine to the travel, transformation, and inspiration it engendered' (p. 107). The language of pilgrimage provided a more positive alternative to that of exile, with the English Bridgettine nuns of Syon choosing to frame their wanderings in Europe in these terms (p. 115). Yet for most English Catholics the possibilities for actual pilgrimage to holy sites were limited, and 'virtual pilgrimages' such as walking the stations of the cross took the place of long journeys (pp. 119–20). Corens challenges the idea that pilgrimage declined in favour of 'purely spiritual journeys' in Counter-Reformation Catholicism, and shows that English Catholics both at home and abroad continued to visit shrines (p. 122). For many English Catholics, mobility through space and time and spiritual transformation were intrinsically linked rather than presenting themselves as alternatives, especially since those seeking to enter the religious life had to make a long journey to reach a community (pp. 124–7). Pilgrimage and 'redemptive journeys', Corens argues, provide a better conceptual template for understanding the expatriate experience than the idea of exile (p. 131).

In the final third of the book, Corens moves from the ways in which expatriate English Catholics understood their situation, and addresses the ways in which English Catholics cemented their common identity as a coherent community while on the move. Corens argues that 'prayers enabled Catholic to foster imagined or virtual communities even though their communities were scattered through their migration and dispersal' (p. 137). Participation in common liturgical acts and devotional prayers conferred on Catholics a common sense of purpose and nationality. Similarly, the sense of belonging offered by membership of spiritual confraternities in the Jesuit tradition strengthened mutual bonds (pp. 143–9). Most important of all, perhaps, were relics, because they linked English Catholics not only to one another but also to their forerunners in the faith, and united them in devotional acts of commemoration. The division of the relics of English and Welsh saints for distribution both at home and abroad meant that the mobility and diffusion of the presence of the saints paralleled the mobility of the living Catholic community. English saints such as St Thomas Becket became a particular focus of devotion and indulgences (p. 155). One question that Corens leaves unanswered, however, is why some English and Welsh saints came to be favoured above others as focuses of common identity in the mobile English Catholic community.

In the end, as Corens emphasises, the English Catholic community was not so much focussed on its own internal unity as on the restoration of unity to Christendom as a whole, by the reconciliation of England with the See of Rome. Prayers for the conversion of England were central to the devotional experience of expatriate Catholics, and the act of intercession for England brought English Catholics together in an effort to restore charitable bonds broken by the Reformation. Furthermore, Catholics were united in their efforts to convert individual Protestants. Corens locates the centrality of co-operation in the mobile English Catholic community in its soteriology: 'collectivity aided their salvation' (p. 162). Catholics united in spirit were therefore a powerful force within the religious understanding of the times. Corens challenges the idea that the success of migration should be measured by the extent of an external community's integration into its host society; English Catholics managed both to participate in their host societies in significant ways and to retain a distinct identity, thereby pointing the way towards a new (and less binary) historiography of migration (p. 163).

A further pillar of the identity of the English Catholic community was its 'written memory' in the form of record keeping (p. 164). This is an aspect of the Catholic community encountered by every historian who has researched this area, yet by focusing attention on the process of record keeping itself, Corens makes a major

breakthrough in the historiography of English Catholicism. She shows that we can never approach English Catholic archives as ‘neutral, passive repositories of distinct documents’ (p. 165); rather, like the community that produced them, they reflect processes of change, evolution and mobility, sometimes altering their purpose from one era to another. Most importantly, however, record-keeping held the dispersed Catholic community together and the collections created were often more than the sum of their parts, such as the remarkable monastic chronicle of the ‘English Maurist’ Ralph Weldon, which developed from a narrative of his own community (St Edmund’s, Paris) into an overarching vision of the entire English mission (pp. 169–70). The preservation of the records of modern martyrs was especially important, not least because it might (and in fact did) contribute to their formal consideration for canonisation at a later time (pp. 171–3). Catholics ‘maintained in paper form their claims to a Catholic England’ (p. 177), creating a ‘counter-archive’ that looked forward to an imagined and hoped for future as much as harking back to a Catholic past. By re-envisioning record keeping as a forward-looking activity, Corens challenges existing paradigms of the historiography of the archive. As she insists, ‘the making itself has a history,’ and an archive cannot be understood apart from the motivations of the people who created it at particular moments in time (pp. 188–90).

Rightly discarding the traditional characterisation of English Catholics as victims in self-contained communities of exile, Corens paints a compelling picture of a dynamic community of active agents. She realigns our view of early modern English Catholicism as an essentially mobile phenomenon, with all the characteristics that entailed. This important book is as much focussed on ideas as evidence, yet it is underpinned by archival research of the highest quality. By building a new conceptual landscape for expatriate English Catholicism, Liesbeth Corens makes a truly transformative contribution to the historiography of early modern English Catholicism and early modern religion, and this book is surely destined to become indispensable reading for scholars of confessional identities in early modern Europe.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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