

Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion c.1400-1700

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Interest in the late-medieval community of Bridgettine sisters at Syon Abbey, Middlesex, has developed fast over the last 25 years, arguably as a result of Roger Ellis' *Viderunt eam filie syon*.⁽¹⁾ In the volume under review, Vincent Gillespie rightly describes Ellis' writings on Syon as 'masterly discussions' (p. 106, fn. 8), but it is Ellis' focus in *Viderunt*, revealed in the sub-title: *The Spirituality of the English House of a Medieval Contemplative Order from its Beginnings to the Present Day*, that was so groundbreaking, investigating the continuity of spirituality which links the medieval with the present-day Syon. Few have followed Ellis' lead in this focus (nor is there much need to), but many have turned to Syon for material on (in particular) late medieval religion and its relation to gender and/or to material textual culture. Both of these areas are skilfully handled in the volume under review, as is that part of Ellis' subtitle, 'from its Beginnings to the Present Day'.

Syon Abbey and its Books originated in a conference at the University of Exeter in October, 2005, organized to mark the deposit of the remains of Syon's library at the University (see the appendix). Exeter's relations with the nuns (of whom the abbess and two sisters still live in Devon) have been close for several years, and the deposit was the natural outcome of this relationship and the uncertain future of the only Bridgettine house ever founded in England and the only Bridgettine house ever to have survived without break from its foundation. The volume is dedicated to the abbess and sisters, and emphasis is placed on the continuity of the house from 1405 to the present day. It is an excellent contribution to studies of Syon, both as an English house of the Bridgettine order ('Bridgettine' is preferred to 'Birgittine') and in relation to gender, manuscripts, and print. Sadly, the use of the volume as an essential reference tool is hampered by its lack of bibliography.

The introduction by the two editors (also organizers of the 2005 conference) 'explores the origins of the community, situates Syon Abbey in its wider historical environment, and sketches the scholarly frameworks within and against which the following essays should be read'. This aim is admirably fulfilled: Jones and Walsham provide an excellent introduction for the newcomer to Syon and a very convenient survey for the *afficionado* (given that so much of Syon research is in journal articles, rather than monographs). The introduction is not, however, just a resumé, well-written and comprehensive as it is: there is originality, not

least in the placing of Syon in its historiographical context as ‘an emblem of the remarkable vitality of Catholicism on the eve of the Reformation’ (p. 16) and of the Bridgettine order as ‘a reformed model of female monasticism that foreshadowed ...the Council of Trent ...’ (p. 18). The treatment of reading at Syon, the house’s ‘horizontal textual relationships with other English religious houses’ (p. 27), and the manuscript and print culture at Syon are also well handled, drawing on the scholarship of the contributors, and beyond, to produce an intelligent synthesis. One might gibe at the statement that the brothers’ huge library was ‘conspicuously lacking in vernacular religious and mystical literature’ (p. 25), since this was clearly not the remit of the brothers’ but (more likely) the sisters’ library (for which no *registrum* survives, as is, admittedly, noted in the next paragraph). The editors confirm that, despite the ‘pockets of excellence’ that have been discovered in other houses of other orders, Syon remains unique in terms of its intellectual brothers and well-born sisters, its double library (for which the brothers’ *registrum*, or catalogue, survives), its social and professional connections, the focus on preaching and learning of the Bridgettine order, its unusual literacy (one-third of all extant vernacular books from female religious houses are connected to Syon), and the sad demise, but not dissolution (*pace* Walker, p. 156), of the house in 1539.

Unlike many conference proceedings, this introduction does not, valiantly and sometimes hopelessly, try to find links amongst disparate contributions. Instead, first, the contributions are introduced and discussed with a light hand, and, second, they fulfil the expectations created by the subtitle, *Reading, Writing and Religion c.1400-1700*, with the added bonus that, where possible, they alert researchers to specific Syon manuscripts and books deposited at Exeter. Moreover, most contributions draw on the researches of Canon John Rory Fletcher (1861-1944), the value of whose work on Syon [\(2\)](#) was early recognised by Ann Hutchison and has been used by several contributors to this volume.

The volume is divided into four sections (each with two essays): ‘Brothers and sisters’, ‘Syon Abbey and the book trade’, ‘The Bridgettines in exile’, and (interestingly and unusually) ‘History and memory’. The first section contains essays by Peter Cunich (‘The brothers of Syon, 1420–1695’) and Virginia R. Bainbridge (‘Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415–1600’). Cunich’s paper is invaluable in providing a succinct and thoughtful review of the Syon brothers, the last of whom died in 1695. The particular relationship of the sisters and brothers (Syon was not a double monastery, as Martin V accepted, thanks to vigorous lobbying by the first Confessor General, Thomas Fishbourne) is well explained – briefly, the brothers existed to celebrate mass, direct the sisters spiritually, and hear confessions, and the Abbess was the superior of the Confessor General in all other matters (a system which did not break down until 1607). Cunich is particularly interesting on what happened to the brothers after Syon closed, whether they lived in the half-dozen small households set up by some sisters, or with the sisters in exile overseas. He discusses, as do later contributors, the importance of Seth Foster as Confessor General (1584–1628), although his dynamic leadership seems to have marked the decline of the Syon sisters’ traditional primacy in relation to the brothers.

Cunich’s paper aims to correct the emphasis in ‘past scholarship’ (p. 39) on the sisters (although he recognises their supremacy in St Bridget’s foundation); Virginia Bainbridge, however, points out that from the mid 19th century until comparatively recently ‘it was not the sisters ... but the smaller group of brothers which attracted academic attention’ (p. 82). Her paper offers an early glimpse of the fruits of her research on the Syon Bridgettines, which will be published in *The Syon Martiloge*, edited by Claes Gejrot (see further below). She synthesizes and augments established research, particularly the work on the sisters by David Bell, Mary Erler, and Ann Hutchison, so that, again, this is an excellent chapter to serve as a starting-point for an overall picture of the intellectual climate in which the Syon sisters lived (up to 1600). Bainbridge’s original work on the special benefactors and friends commemorated in the *Martiloge* is particularly valuable since she demonstrates the large number of benefactors who also supported, or even founded, other centres of learning (as Syon was), at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

The second section includes ‘Syon and the English market for continental printed books: the incunable phase’ (Vincent Gillespie) and “‘Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon’’: Syon Abbey and English books’ (C. Annette Grisé). Gillespie’s paper, a revision of an already published

piece on Syon and the Latin trade, deals only with books up to 1500, and, although this is valuable, one might wish (with Gillespie, p. 104, fn. 1) that a similar study of the post-incunable period might appear, now that all scholars have access to Gillespie's edition of the brothers' *registrum*. He locates the fact that the brothers' library developed after 1471 into 'a treasure house of learning through the acquisition and accession of large numbers of printed books' (p. 111) in the decision to offer library benefactors a special requiem mass. The principal donors were, however, the brothers themselves – the third Confessor General, Thomas Westhaw (1472–88) brought many printed editions to Syon (often in *Sammelbände*, the importance of which Gillespie emphasises). Families, friends, printers (Wynkyn de Worde is notable here), and importers also contributed to the library. (As the record of an almost entirely Latin library, the *registrum* is notable, of course, for its imported books, a market dominated by foreign merchants, and one on which Gillespie has provided invaluable evidence in his edition.) The five case-studies at the end of this paper, on two Confessors General, a Cambridge man, an Oxford man, and (perhaps) a lay-brother, provide excellent epitomes of the process by which Syon augmented its library, the printed books they brought to Syon, and 'the cultural milieu of their previous lives' (p. 126, a useful *caveat*). The chapter closes with an appendix of incunables identified in the Syon *registrum*.

Grisé's essay covers a broad area, as its title suggests. She looks at Syon authors, texts, and printers, and argues for shared characteristics in Syon products (rather undermined by her later admission (p. 142) that these are characteristics of devotional print as a whole): a didactic and practical focus, careful use of *ordinatio*, 'high quality, well-written, conservative texts' (p. 141). Next, she addresses the 'framing materials' of the Syon editions, rightly acknowledging the important work of Martha Driver on Syon woodcuts, but also looking at title pages and prefatory matter, and providing some discursive discussions of specific texts in order to demonstrate the range of audience. There is perhaps some vagueness about previous scholarship, where footnotes would have been useful: 'Whitford's popularity and productivity have led scholars and readers to attribute ...', 'Scholars have also written about ...' (p. 139), 'This text has received scholarly notice' (p. 140). Likewise, more references are needed in the discussion of woodcuts: for example, 'The Pylgrymage ... Bradshaw' (p. 145) would be much more useful with the three *STC* references (*STC* 3277, 4602, and 3506, and the second date is 1516, not 1506). To some extent the essay overlaps with my own 'Syon Abbey as a centre for text production'.⁽³⁾ Both (I would venture to say) are full, useful, and independent interpretations of the evidence for Syon's vernacular editions as provided by the printed books themselves.

The second half of the volume deals with the post-Reformation period and is less familiar to me than earlier material. In the third section, Claire Walker looks at 'Continuity and isolation: The Bridgettines of Syon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' and Caroline Bowden at 'Books and reading at Syon Abbey, Lisbon, in the seventeenth century'. Walker writes (with acknowledged use of Canon Fletcher's material) on the sisters and their travails in the period of exile after they were expelled from Syon in 1539 (the Abbey was never actually dissolved). Their final departure from England in 1559 (those who had left in 1539 returned briefly, unfortunately just before Mary's death) led to a period of hardship (the result of poverty and local prejudice) in various venues in Flanders, the Netherlands, and France, but from 1594 they settled comfortably in Lisbon under the protection of Philip II, where their historic archives were to be lost in a fire in 1651. Only in 1861 did they return home.

What is particularly valuable in Walker's chapter is that she compares the sisters' experience with that of other European female communities but emphasizes the ways in which they remained 'distinctive to the end of their exile' (p. 175) from those other communities. She is also interesting on the pro-active roles in the 1560s and 1570s of the Catholic controversialist Nicholas Sander and his sister, the Bridgettine Elizabeth Sander. Bowden's chapter complements Walker's in that it focusses on the books of the sisters in exile, not just book history but also reading practice, where, for example, she writes imaginatively and interestingly on the role of reading in the new Uses drawn up in 1607. She draws comparison with the new English convents founded outside England (nine between 1598–1630, with 345 members) but, like Walker, argues for the distinctiveness of the Syon house in Lisbon from other houses, as well as from lay readers. Indeed, she suggests a continuity of relationship from the Carthusians of Sheen (who in the pre-Reformation period

copied texts for the Syon sisters to study) to Father Charles Dimock (1656) who lent the sisters an interestingly conservative selection of 13 ‘Bookes of my own handwriting’ (p. 189). Although Syon obviously no longer influenced the printers’ output (as it had before the Reformation), the sisters continued the medieval tradition in that they read works written and published for specifically female communities and made their own transcriptions and even translations.

The final section contains two chapters by well-known Bridgettine scholars, Claes Gejrot and Ann M. Hutchison (‘The Syon Martiloge’ and ‘Syon Abbey preserved: some historians of Syon’). Gejrot’s chapter provides an excellent introduction to his edition (in progress) of the Syon Martiloge, the martyrology (and much more) of the abbey from the 15th century until 1647. Perhaps the details of abbesses, confessors general, and brothers and sisters, the obituary, and the list of benefactors are of most interest to Syon scholars (and they are ably discussed by Gejrot), but most of the (mainly Latin) manuscript is in fact made up of the martyrology (stories taken from the lives of martyrs) which gives the book its name, followed by lections added in a later hand (which have been studied by Vincent Gillespie, as Gejrot notes, p. 204, fn. 4). Gejrot, like Gillespie, recognises the significance of the book donation of Thomas Graunt in 1471 – for Gejrot it is the likely impetus for the compilation of the Martiloge. All in all, this is an extremely valuable, almost mouth-watering, preview of the introduction and content of Gejrot’s edition of the Syon Martiloge, to which Bainbridge, as noted earlier, will contribute.

Finally, Ann Hutchison, who has worked on the Exeter material for over 20 years and written extensively on the Syon sisters, provides an overview of some of those who have recorded Syon. The selection is not conventional: the ‘historians’ of the title are two sisters (see too Walker, pp. 171–5), Mary Champney and Elizabeth Sander, two monks, Robert Persons SJ and Adam Hamilton OSB, and a Catholic convert, Canon J. Rory Fletcher. Both the Syon sisters had been secretly sent back to England in 1578 in order to raise funds for the exiled community: some sisters were arrested, although travelling in disguise, and the survival of these two in England was not without danger. Indeed, Sister Mary’s story was recorded as she lay dying in 1580. Sister Elizabeth, sister of the redoubtable Nicholas and the Syon prioress, Margaret, survived and wrote two letters about her extraordinarily hazardous experiences (and her extremely unhelpful priest-companions – my comment, not hers!) before she was recalled to Rouen in 1587. Hutchison’s discussion of Father Persons’ work on the English mission is equally fascinating, including disguise as an army captain and the setting up of a printing press. Dom Hamilton, on the other hand, was fortunate in not living in the Elizabethan period: as a Benedictine of Buckfast Abbey, refounded in 1882, the Bridgettines were his neighbours, and he undertook to edit the long account of their exile, *The Wanderings of Syon*. Finally, it is fitting that the volume should end with Canon Fletcher, to whom Hutchison, always impeccable in her acknowledgements of other scholars, gives due credit as ‘indefatigable researcher’ (p. 246).

The volume as a whole contains nine well-chosen black-and-white illustrations, mostly title-pages. The index is short but good – it lists the sisters and brothers by name and the books by individual title. The lack of bibliography is regrettable – some contributors may not know the full range of publications and future researchers may not search all the footnotes anyway. For example, my own article on ‘Preaching at Syon Abbey’ is noted only as a working paper by Cunich (p. 50, fn. 64), whereas it was published in *Leeds Studies in English* in 2000 (as Gillespie notes, p. 107, fn. 10): a bibliography would have reconciled these references. At the risk of sounding petulant, I note that no contributor refers to my 1998 article on ‘Lady Margaret Beaufort and her books’ (4) which has much to say on Syon and the print-trade (although I admit that the title might not suggest so). Similarly, although it is a journal of perhaps variable quality and relevance to Syon scholars, articles in *Birgittiana* (of which I have contributed two, in 1996 and 2005, the first noted by Gillespie, p. 107, fn. 10) should not have been overlooked, as they appear to have been. There are a few typos, which a medievalist editor, such as I am, is trained to notice: *shalt* is grammatically incorrect in ‘Thoo booke they shalt haue’ and ‘vnsterstonde’ is clearly wrong (p. 3); ‘priest-bother’ is a typo which the reformers would have liked (p. 78); ‘*Seenys*’ (p. 142) should be ‘*Senis*’ (the title is actually *Lyf of Saint Katherin of Senis*: some other titles in this chapter also differ from the printed title-page); the abbey of ‘Denney’ (p. 148, taken from the edition’s title-page) is today ‘Denny’.

A final corrective to what may seem negative elements in the previous paragraph. This is a valuable and, indeed, seminal work. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the Bridgettine house of Syon Abbey, or, more generally, in European female communities in the late medieval and early modern periods. The editors and contributors must take pride in an excellent work of scholarship. It gave me immense pleasure to read it, and I learned much from it.

Notes

1. Roger Ellis, *Viderunt eam filie syon*, Analecta Cartusiana, 68 (Salzburg, 1984).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Exeter University Library MS 95.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Susan Powell, 'Syon Abbey as a centre for text production', in *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: Papers from a Symposium in Stockholm 4-6 October 2007*, ed. Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg and Mia Åkestam, Konferenser, 73 (Stockholm, 2010), pp. 50–70.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Susan Powell, 'Lady Margaret Beaufort and her books', *The Library*, 6th series, 20 (1998), 197–240.
[Back to \(4\)](#)

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