

Redrawing the Map of Early Modern English Catholicism

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‘This book presents an itinerary of English Catholicism in the early modern period’ (p. 3) claims the editor in the opening sentence of this volume, which originates in a symposium convened by Lowell Gallagher at UCLA in 2007, since when the field has flourished. Indeed in 2013 early modern English Catholicism is in vogue, as testified by two major interdisciplinary conferences held this summer dedicated to the topic. The first, ‘Popes and the Papacy in Early Modern English Culture’, which took place at the University of Sussex, included keynote addresses from two of the contributors to this volume, Alison Shell (chapter five) and Susannah Monta (chapter ten). The second, ‘What is Early Modern English Catholicism?’, hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University in honour of Eamon Duffy, featured keynote addresses from other significant leaders within the field, such as Alexandra Walsham.

In the volume under consideration Walsham is notable for her absence, and despite the editorial claim that this study is interdisciplinary it quickly becomes apparent that the work will have far more use for literary critics than for historians. The lack of relevant historical literature is alarming, particularly when Gallagher introduces the journey for the readers of this volume as one that will blur the ‘visible borderlands between the *remnant* of English Catholicism and the culturally dominant cadre of English Protestantism’ [reviewer’s italics] (p.3). This implies that early modern English Catholicism was a remnant of late medieval piety, with Gallagher adhering to the picture of the Catholic community painted by Christopher Haigh. Haigh was responding to the depiction of early modern English Catholicism as a sharp break with the English Catholic past, which John Bossy had argued in his epoch-making *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (1975) was a new type of community founded and sustained by the missionary activity of priests.(1)

It is not so much the stance Gallagher takes that is troubling, but rather his failure to mention or even reference the debates that have characterised the field for almost 40 years. Even if scholars do not wish to rehash the old and by now tired Bossy/Haigh debates – whether English Catholicism during this period was a remnant of late medieval Catholicism (Haigh) or something different (Bossy) – Gallagher needs to explain when he and his contributors see ‘(Early Modern) English Catholicism’ beginning. Most recent scholars, and indeed some of Gallagher’s contributors, have chosen to view ‘early modern’ English Catholicism as a complex blend of sorts – with nuances that defy periodization as much as they define it – and this should have been clear from the outset.

Other omissions include reference to the leading historians in the field of post-Reformation English Catholicism, whilst the work of literary critics has been prioritised. For example, when the editor places the volume within the discourses of ‘accommodation’ and emphasises that the ‘choreography of familial as well as neighbourly and communal relations’ amongst English Catholics was variegated (pp. 4–5), a reference to work of Professor Bill Sheils and the resulting *festschrift* on the subject in his honour would have been expected.(2) Perhaps such gaps are the reflection of the time it took for the volume to turn from symposium (2007) to print (2012) and yet in discussions of ‘tolerance’ there seems no excuse to have overlooked Alexandra Walsham’s *Charitable Hatred* (2006).(3) When highlighting the complexity of familiar, neighbourly and communal relations among post-Reformation English Catholics, there should also have been reference to the expert analysis of the household, kinship and patronage networks of the Catholic Browne family of West Sussex from Michael Questier’s *Catholicism and Community* (2006).(4)

Gallagher’s neglect of the most pertinent work in the field is made most acute when he highlights Anne Sweeney’s 2006 study of the English Jesuit poet and missionary Robert Southwell.(5) Gallagher suggests Sweeney has captured ‘the conundrum inhabiting the improvisational and negotiated condition of early modern English Catholicism: “When is a Catholic not a Catholic?” As Sweeney points out, ‘Contemporary terminology was unable to contain the variety, range, and depth of shades of religious conformity or otherwise in late Elizabethan England’ (p. 8). Yet this ‘conundrum’ had already been captured in 1993 by Alexandra Walsham in her pivotal study of *Church Papists*.(6) These surprising oversights characterise the remainder of the introduction and negatively coloured this reader’s initial impression of the contents of this volume.

The volume contains eleven chapters organised into three sections: three essays under the heading ‘Signposts’ and what the editor claims are ‘shibboleths’ of the field (p.10); four essays on ‘Poetics’ and specific literary figures and works of Catholic poetry; with the final (more historical) four chapters under the subtitle ‘Communities’. These last contributions are effectively cross-disciplinary and highlight the negotiation and survival strategies of English Catholics despite their marginalisation to the ‘borderland’ (p. 16).

The first contributor, Arthur Marotti in chapter two, highlights the Protestant assault on the ‘residual’ sensuality of Catholic culture present in early modern England (p. 27). Marotti looks at Catholic responses to the Protestant charges of idolatry and engages with literary manifestations of the controversy found within John Foxe, Nicholas Sander, John Donne and Ben Jonson – to cite just a few of his wide-ranging examples.

Yet the overall view Marotti presents is a negative and rather outdated one; it looks as if Catholics gave up trying and joined their Protestant neighbours in a victorious eradication of the sensuous – for ‘idolatry’ entailed ‘primarily the wrong kind of seeing’ (p. 29). For reformers, spiritual seeing needed to become an intellectual exercise as opposed to sensuous one. However as recent work from Matt Milner and others have shown, in practice Protestantism retained elements of the sensuous in religious devotions and it is certainly not straightforward that ‘[t]he new Protestant had to use his or her eyes differently from the old Catholic’ (p. 28).⁽⁷⁾ Marotti begins to acknowledge this towards the end of this chapter when he asserts that ‘Protestantism does not function on some supra-sensible level ... Idolatry was driven out of churches ... but it returned in new forms’ (p. 40). Yet this needs to be central to the argument rather than mentioned amidst the final points of a suggestive conclusion.

In chapter three Frances Dolan examines equivocation, an issue pertinent to early modern debates surrounding torture and treason. Dolan analyses two texts: the official account of the treason trial of Henry Garnet, *A True and Perfect Relation* (1606) and the later, lesser-known *Confession and Execution of Leticia Wigington* (1681). Dolan’s comparison is useful for revealing the common recycling of titles, texts and tropes along various points of the confessional spectrum in order to explore how the relationship between confession and identity was negotiated. Unfortunately this chapter relies on *ODNB* articles rather than the most relevant historiography when engaging with the literature on Catholic political loyalism, which has been championed most notably by Michael Questier, who is absent from Dolan’s references.

Chapter four and the final essay in the ‘Signposts’ section by Holly Crawford Pickett stands out from the previous chapters and her analysis focuses on ‘serial converts’ William Alabaster, Marc Antonio De Dominis and William Chillingworth. Pickett’s chapter is the first to engage rigorously with the theme of the volume as she reveals how cartographic metaphors and vocabularies of exploration were used both to condemn as well as justify multiple conversions. As John Floyd complained about De Dominis, ‘Your going, to which your title prescribes not any end, nor restraynes within the compasse of any markes, what may it seeme, but a vast, uncertaine, blind and inconsiderate wandering?’ (p. 85). Moreover the converts themselves explained their conversions in similar terms either for example as the result of foreign travel (William Chillingworth, p. 102) or even in more theoretical terms as they used tropes from natural sciences about the movement of physical bodies to explain and defend their state of religious flux (Alabaster, De Dominis and Chillingworth, p. 105).

Pickett’s call to reinstate these serial converts as individuals worthy of enquiry is taken up and refined by Alison Shell in the following chapter within this volume and first in the category of ‘Poetics’. Chapter five analyses William Alabaster’s use of the poetic palinode and moves beyond previous literary criticism that has dismissed Alabaster’s poetry for not fitting neatly on either side of the confessional divide. Shell highlights how Alabaster’s sonnets ‘use autobiographical repentance as a fulcrum for the reversals of poetic palinode’ (p. 118). Shell demonstrates how Alabaster’s devotional poetry – rather simply than inward and meditative – was surprisingly public and revealed concern with the wider social consequences of conversion. Taken together, both Pickett and Shell’s chapters serve as a precursor to much new and exciting work on conversion that is currently occurring in the field of early modern religious history.⁽⁸⁾

Chapters six, seven and eight are the most literary in the volume. In chapter six Richard Rambuss defends Richard Crashaw’s style of poetics as revealing in equal measure the influences of Anglicanism, Catholicism and the English context of Cambridge and argues that it flaunts its ‘Counter-Reformation enthusiasms like no other seventeenth-century English poetry’ (p. 150). The following two chapters focus on Robert Southwell and in chapter seven Gary Kuchar argues that hitherto unnoticed alchemical allegories within *Saint Peter’s Complaint* reveal distinctly recusant concerns (p. 166). Kuchar highlights that the alchemical vision found in much late-Elizabethan poetry (across confessions) was translated and adapted to the demands of post-Tridentine penance. In chapter eight, Jennifer Rust argues that Robert Southwell’s Catholic resistance ideology as revealed in *Marie Magdalens Funerall Teares* (1591) was parodied by the polemical argument of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590–6), particularly book five, canto nine, which describes the execution of Malengin. Rust’s argument also highlights how certain literary techniques were utilised and reacted against by both Catholic and Protestant writers. Indeed, the way it shows how literature could

variously bridge the confessional divide is probably this volume's most compelling feature.

The final section on 'Communities' has the most obvious significance for historians of early modern English Catholicism and chapter nine is without doubt the highlight of the entire volume. Phebe Jensen expertly examines the evolution of Catholic Christmas over the course of the 17th century and argues that early modern English Catholicism was neither late medieval, nor post-Tridentine in character but defined by 'complex interactions between the two' (p. 213). Jensen also contributes to the cross-confessional theme of the volume by highlighting how the devotional rituals of both Protestant and Catholic Christmases were in many ways 'indistinguishable' during this period, as evidenced by the appeal of Catholic writers such as Robert Southwell and Luis de Granada to a Protestant audience and the inclusion of a Catholic Christmas carol in a landmark collection of English verse, *England's Helicon* (1600) (p. 214).

Through expert analysis of 17th-century manuscript collections, such as the 'Great Hodge Podge' from the Blundell household in Lancashire and the Shann commonplace book from Yorkshire, Jensen reveals how Catholics embraced 'the negative Protestant associations of Christmas with popery'. This was in order to define themselves 'as a religious community in the polemical context of their outlawed religion', which led to 'new meanings of the English Catholic Christmas' as evidenced in 'seventeenth-century Christmas carols'. This carolling was part of the Catholic family's larger efforts at 'cultural and religious self-definition' (p. 223). According to Jensen, the composition and performance of carols in these Catholic households demonstrates how Catholic teachings were channelled through educated laity and how popular religious practices associated with Christmas took on a renewed theological and polemical significance as the 17th century progressed (pp. 232–3).

In chapter ten Susannah Monta utilises Robert Southwell's *Short Rule of Good Life* in both its Catholic and Protestant manifestations to reveal how patterns of domestic piety were shared across the confessional divide. Monta also reveals how such worship consolidated Catholics in opposition to Protestants and argues that a distinctively Catholic domestic piety was no less significant than Protestantism to the development of religious and national identities. Monta enhances our understanding of how writers 'forged links between past and present, native and foreign, re-inscribing an estranged religious Catholicism in the most familiar of English spaces: the home' (p. 248). Monta's analysis complements emerging new work on household devotion in the field of religious history and she stresses that 'English Catholics shared with English Protestants an interest in structuring the home as a site of religious devotion and formation' (p. 249).⁽⁹⁾ Monta's analysis reveals how, by drawing upon hagiographical traditions, what 'Helgeson calls the affective superiority of the domestic home – responsible for the alternative formation, by as early as the mid-seventeenth century, of a domestic space that supersedes the civil in its claim on personal loyalties – may thus owe a debt to Catholic as well as Protestant, Puritan, or radical writers' (p. 252). Whilst this leads to broader questions surrounding how Catholics wrote about England, what relationship the home had on specifically Catholic ideas about nationhood and state-formation, and how these were distinct from Protestant ideas, Monta's analysis reveals how the various adaptations to Southwell's *Rule* labour to reconcile such tensions between territories of Protestant and Catholic devotion.⁽¹⁰⁾

The final two chapters of this volume are the only two from scholars within history departments. Chapter 11 by Anne Dillon reconstructs in great detail the pious practice of the Confraternity of the Rosary at Cardigan House in London. The confraternity was established at the beginning of the Interregnum from c.1650 and was dissolved in the aftermath of the Popish Plot, which drove the confraternity underground in 1678. Dillon highlights the vibrancy of the confraternity in its daily practice and meticulously narrates the often lavish liturgical ceremonies, which largely went unmolested. Through these ceremonies, the confraternity 'embodied and transmitted to the Catholic communities the new Tridentine doctrine and rituals that reflected the changed emphases of the Counter-Reformation Church' (p. 280). Whilst perhaps the significance of this confraternity has been somewhat overstated by Dillon (this reader is not convinced that 28 years of practice warrants a 'flourishing' society and the 'grave risks' to the members of the penal laws during this period are also largely theoretical, as in reality these were rarely enforced), the chapter nonetheless adds to our understanding of how early modern English Catholics practiced their faiths in the absence of priests. In Dillon's own words, '[a]s well as serving a devotional function, the confraternity crucially served a para-

liturgical one as well, and these artefacts were symbols of their shared community life expressed in and through their religious rituals’ (pp. 290–1).

In the final chapter in this volume, Stefania Tutino offers a theological analysis of Thomas White’s *The Grounds of Obedience and Government* (1655). Tutino argues that White’s pro-republican tract, rather than simply secular, merged the language of natural law with Catholic theology. Tutino claims that White was a peculiar hybrid and although he declared his positions to be no more than theoretical, Tutino asserts that in fact the political consequences of this position amounted to endorsements of Cromwell’s regime. Tutino’s analysis calls upon scholars to look afresh at the religious elements within English republicanism, which have largely been ignored (p. 321).

In sum, several of the contributors to this volume engage with the leading issues of the field and a few make invaluable contributions to our understanding of post-Reformation English Catholicism. Yet there are critical gaps in the narrative and the focus on the nobility and gentry, poetry and hagiography has unbalanced our understanding of what it really meant to be Catholic in early modern England. The implication of the title of this book that the collection will ‘redraw the map of early modern English Catholicism’ is grandiose and despite its merits, the volume fails to earn itself a place on the map as a key text for the field.

Notes

1. John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (London, 1975) vs. Christopher Haigh, ‘The fall of a church or the rise of a sect?’, *Historical Journal*, 2 (1978), 181–6; ‘The continuity of Catholicism in the English Reformation’, *Past and Present*, 93 (1981), 37–69; ‘From monopoly to minority: Catholicism in early modern England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31 (1981), 129–47; and ‘Revisionism, the Reformation, and the history of English Catholicism’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 26 (1985), 394–405. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. W. J. Sheils, ‘Catholics and their neighbours in a rural community: Egton Chapelry 1590–1780’, *Northern History*, 34–5 (1998–9), 109–33; ‘Getting on’ and ‘Getting along’ in parish and town: Catholics and their neighbours in England’, in *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands, c.1570–1720*, ed. Benjamin Kaplan et al. (Manchester, 2009), pp. 67–83 and see also *Getting Along? Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England – Essays in Honour of Professor W. J. Sheils*, ed. Nadine Lewycky and Adam Morton (Farnham, 2012). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester, 2006). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Michael Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c.1550–1640* (Cambridge, 2006). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Anne R. Sweeney, *Robert Southwell: Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English lyric landscape*, (Manchester, 2006), p. 23. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 1993). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Matt Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, (Farnham, 2011) and see also *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Wietse de Boer and Christine Gottler (Leiden, 2012) and Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy and Elizabeth Swann, *Religion and the Senses in the Pre-Modern World* (forthcoming). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See the website of the AHRC-funded Conversion Narratives project (2010–13) at the University of York <<http://www.york.ac.uk/crems/conversion>> [2] [accessed 6 August 2013]. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See for example *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Jessica Martin and Alec Ryrie (Farnham, 2012); Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, (Oxford, 2013); and *Religion and the Household*, Vol. 50 of *Studies in Church History*, ed. John Doran and Charlotte Methuen (Woodbridge, forthcoming 2014). [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See forthcoming work in this area from Lucy Underwood. [Back to \(10\)](#)

The author acknowledges receipt of this review and does not wish to comment further.

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