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## English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800, Part 1 (Book Review)

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Caroline Bowden, Laurence Lux-Sterritt, and Nicky Hallett, eds. *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800. Part 1.*

Vols. 1–3. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012. cxviii + 1265 pp. \$495. ISBN: 978 1 84893 214 2.

“Who Were the Nuns?” (WWTN), the online database overseen by Caroline Bowden, has already demonstrated that around 4,000 women joined English convents on the Continent between 1600 and 1800. As the general editor of *English Convents in Exile* (a six volume edition of texts culled from the archival research conducted for WWTN), Bowden now casts a much needed light on the experiences and writings of these cloistered Englishwomen. The publication of the first three volumes from this landmark edition, which largely consists of previously unedited manuscripts from convent archives, is sure to fuel the growing interest among historians and literary scholars in English nuns of this period.

Volume 1 (*History Writing*), edited by Bowden, contains the first two parts of the manuscript chronicles composed by the Rouen Poor Clares (the third part is forthcoming in volume 6 of the edition). Nuns used a variety of historical genres in order to establish a communal identity and history, and the Rouen chronicle offers an excellent example of how individual lives were subsumed into collective frameworks. The first two parts of the chronicle cover the house’s history from its founding in 1644 to 1780. This heterogeneous text incorporates a range of English and French documents, including obituaries, contracts with patrons, and letters to and from the convent. The result is a lively account of cloistered life, with notable vignettes in which the nuns help build their cloister, pray for English soldiers to lose the 1657 siege of Dunkirk, suffer outbreaks of the plague, or cope with a fire in their malthouse. The house was hardly isolated from the wider world or English politics. Acquainted with English and French residents of Rouen, the nuns had connections to ecclesiastical authorities (Cardinal Francesco Barberini), English royalty (the courts of Charles II and James II), and French houses (the Cistercian monks of La Trappe, and French Benedictine convents in Rouen and Paris). The Rouen nuns also offered refuge to English Catholics fleeing the Titus Oates Plot (1678) and the Revolution of 1688. Throughout, the chronicle reinforces the convent’s identity as a locus of monastic austerity, especially while handling potentially scandalous material such as the defection of Irish nuns.

Volume 2 (*Spirituality*), edited by Laurence Lux Sterritt, offers a wide selection of texts detailing spiritual practices at a number of houses. When women entered convents, they encountered an unfamiliar environment with distinctive customs and rhythms. Part 1, "The Stages of a Nun's Life," supplies texts that document and explain this world, including guidelines for profession ceremonies from the Hoogstraten Carmelites and Liège Sepulchrines. In part 3, "Rules and Liturgy," selections from devotional manuals associated with Benedictines and Poor Clares provide insight into the regulations that structured every aspect of convent life. Other sections focus on the manuscript and print texts that nuns read in order to foster their spiritual advancement. Part 2, "Spiritual Instructions and Guidance," contains prescriptive treatises written by nuns and priests on meditative methods including the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. In part 4, "Hagiography, Martyrology, and Edification," Lux Sterritt groups together obituaries of exemplary nuns as well as popular texts such as the second edition of *The Roman Martyrologe* (1667). Finally, part 5, "Nuns' Writings," offers a sustained look at the nuns' own devotional writings. While previous sections included works produced by nuns, this section focuses on individual spirituality, from personalized prayers and meditations to the poetry of Anne Throckmorton (1687–1734), a Paris Augustinian. Such works are not necessarily apolitical or private, as demonstrated by Catherine Gascoigne's 1633 defense of the controversial mysticism espoused by Augustine Baker.

Volume 3 (*Life Writing I*), edited by Nicky Hallett with contributions from Elizabeth Perry and Victoria Van Hynning, assembles texts documenting nuns' lives. This volume casts a wide net, including typical life writing genres (autobiography, biography, and obituaries) as well as profession certificates and letters. In part 1, "Reading and Writing Lives," Hallett gathers accounts of prominent nuns from the Louvain Augustinians, Brussels and Pontoise Benedictines, and Gravelines Poor Clares. *The Life of Leonor de Mendanha*, the only Portuguese abbess of the Lisbon Bridgettines, serves as a salutary reminder that these convents attracted local women. *The Life of Lucy Knatchbull* (Ghent Benedictines) has already been edited by David Knowles (*The Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull* [1931]), but Hallett's version is based on a previously unknown manuscript from the Liège Sepulchrines, which abridges the work to focus on Knatchbull's spiritual experiences. Part 2, "Vocation, Arrival, Clothing and Profession," contains material that complements Volume 2: profession certificates from the Brussels Benedictines and Lisbon Bridgettines as well as accounts of professions at the Brussels Benedictines and Gravelines Poor Clares. In part 3, "Daily Lives," letters from the Aire Poor Clares, Cambrai Benedictines, and Louvain Augustinians reveal the ways that nuns interacted with family and friends after profession. In some of the most memorable selections, nuns request assistance after major disasters such as the Lisbon Earthquake. This section also includes a recipe book from the Gravelines Poor Clares (with weekly menus) and two poems written by male authors on nuns' jubilees (the fifty year anniversary of their profession).

As this overview suggests, these volumes cover a range of orders and convents, with the exception of the uncloistered Mary Ward Institute. Even so, the selections have much in common, perhaps because these women faced similar struggles: to cultivate a shared religious identity, to propagate English Catholicism, to survive in a foreign land, and to pursue a close spiritual relationship with God. Genres that could serve these ends—such as chronicles, obituaries, letters, and didactic or instructive material—appear across volumes. These parallels allow readers an opportunity to make illuminating comparisons between convents and orders, revealing the rich complexity of cloistered life as well as shared threads of devotion and monastic customs.

The editors approach their sources conservatively, expanding contractions but preserving spelling, punctuation, and strike outs. Material characteristics that impede full transcription (burns, creases, tears) are duly noted. Generous annotations identify convent terminology, archaic words, and historical figures, and introductory notes offer information on the authors and their historical contexts. Because of the editors' commendable fidelity to their sources, these volumes are best suited to advanced students and scholars. Indeed, readers must exercise caution in dealing with volume 3's *Life of Margaret Clement*, which is based on a transcription of the manuscript by Dorothy Latz that does not consistently expand or identify manuscript abbreviations. A few minor typos and errors occur throughout, and the addition of an index of major people and places would have facilitated cross referencing.

The first three volumes of *English Convents in Exile* chart important new territory for a number of scholarly fields, including history, literature, religious studies, and women's studies. While the price may destine this edition for libraries rather than the individual scholar's bookshelf, these volumes will be a vital resource for anyone interested in early modern Englishwomen's lives and writings. The substantial accomplishments of this first installment suggest that the three concluding volumes of this edition, which are slated for publication in 2013, will be similarly groundbreaking.

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