

English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century

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I.

When an English nun entered a convent in exile in the 17th century, she was expected to leave behind once and for all ‘the world, the flesh, the divill’. Until recently, that enclosure was one of the excuses for the banishment of nuns from historical research, reducing them to a faceless, agentless mass. The two other heads of the ‘three-headed Cerberus’ guarding the entrance into historiography, as Laurence Lux-Sterritt points out in *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century* (p. 252), are exile and sex. Though both exile and sex have long been an important topic for historians of the early modern period – see, for example, Nicholas Terpstra’s *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World*, the edited volume *Religious Diaspora in Early Modern Europe: Strategies of Exile* and Merry Wiesner-Hanks’ *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (1) – it is the combination of the three ‘heads’ that has warranted historiographical amnesia concerning English nuns in exile. Gabriel Glickman omits the English convents entirely in *The English Catholic Community, 1689–1745. Politics, Culture and Ideology* (Woodbridge, 2009). (2) Brian C. Lockey’s *Early Modern Catholics, Royalists, and Cosmopolitans* (3), for example, examines British Catholic and royalist exiles as cosmopolitans, while studies like Katy Gibbons’ *English Catholic Exiles in Late Sixteenth-Century Paris* (4) have paved the way for a history of English Catholic exiles in particular.

English nuns on the continent have mostly been excluded from such works. In the last few years, however, early modern women religious from the British Isles in exile on the Continent have been retrieved from their

historiographical seclusion. In 2003 Claire Walker wrote *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (5), and a steady stream of articles and conferences have since placed an emphasis on the early modern communities of English nuns in mainland Europe – the magisterial six-volume *English Convents in Exile* edited by Caroline Bowden and the volume *The English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800* edited by Bowden and James E. Kelly to mention just two notable additions. (6) As these studies have shown, the cloistered nun who was shielded from society behind the walls of the convent and encapsulated inside her enclosed community was an aspirational ideal that in practice was the subject of continuous renegotiation.

The theory of the convent as a self-contained, homogeneous community was dealt a decisive blow by the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project [‘Who were the nuns?’](#) [2] (2008-2013), among the collaborators of which were not coincidentally Bowden, Kelly and Lux-Sterritt. *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century* builds upon the prosopographical data of the project, which includes an online database containing over 4,000 English women who chose exile in a Continental convent between 1600–1800. As such, the book is a showcase of the potential and the merits of the database. Its main purpose is to show the experiences of contemplative life in exile for the English Benedictine nuns (the convent of Ypres with its distinctively Irish character is excluded) as women of flesh and blood, and undertakes the noble endeavour to ‘name the nuns’, that is, to lift them out of the anonymity of a ‘homogeneous sisterhood of like minds’ and situate them instead within a heterogeneous community of individuals, with divergent and sometimes conflicting ideas and practices. The early modern Catholic Church was ‘divided in matters of policies and of spiritual practice’ (p. 250), Lux-Sterritt stresses. It is a statement that counts for the Church as much as for the English convents in exile.

The book is able to take as its central focus the nuns’ lived monastic experience precisely because Lux-Sterritt and others have worked to identify the women religious as individuals within a community. That groundwork allows *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile* to be built around a few tensions, most notably between Benedictine life as prescribed and life in the Benedictine convent ‘as lived’. In that respect the subtitle, ‘Living spirituality’, only covers part of the book. *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile* is divided into two parts: the first four chapters illuminate the central tension running through the necessary relationship of the convents with the outer world (as opposed to the prescribed rule of leaving that world behind): they examine issues of entrance, recruitment, management, and mission. The four chapters of the second part concentrate on the personal and individual paths of the Benedictine nuns to spirituality, beyond body and senses: to leave behind ‘the flesh’ and their ‘owne sensuality’, as the abbess of Cambrai, Christine Brent, described to her sisters.

Each thematic chapter delves into a particular aspect of enclosed religious exile and, by doing so, nuances that enclosure. Chapter one shows that ‘dying to the world’ and forsaking one’s family, children, friends, and even mirrors, was an ideal of detachment that could not be attained in practice, particularly for women in exile. (For Benedictine monks in exile such detachment was not prescribed. See the AHRC-project at the University of Durham, [‘Monks in motion’](#) [3].) As is clear from the sources, this ‘dying’ is not to be reduced to voluntary imprisonment; for some entrants it was instead a liberation from mundane duties. Their ‘death’ served not as the end point but rather as the start of a lifelong spiritual process behind convent walls. Throughout the book, Lux-Sterritt peppers her analysis of life in exiled enclosure with lively anecdotes that help to show the nuns as individuals coming from different backgrounds. When Mary Hawes, for example, entered the convent in Paris, she gave up a life of entertainment at the court of Charles II. The vignettes illustrate the gulf between what was prescribed and the nuns’ day-to-day lives. Their backstories also show how momentous the decision to live under the Benedictine Rule was; it required a total commitment to public *and* private transformation. That such transformation did not happen overnight, becomes clear through these anecdotes. Many of the nuns in exile stood by the grate of their convent to hear rumours from beyond the convent walls.

The following three chapters examine how and where the outside world seeped into the enclosure. Though physical and spiritual separation were symbolised in the high walls and the two gates of the convent, neither the architecture nor the Benedictine and Tridentine rules succeeded in warranting complete abandon for the

inhabitants. Indeed a thread running through the chapters are the locations where the walls prove to have been most porous and where the enclosed life intersected with the world, like the convent grate, the correspondence box, or the kitchen turn that permitted an exchange of goods without contact. In one exceptional case in the 1620s Francis Evers escaped from enclosed life in Brussels through the kitchen turn. Chapter two and three, on the blurred line between natal and monastic family and on the financial complexities of running a convent, convincingly show that a 'secular presence' was, in fact, an absolute necessity for the institution's survival. Chapter four explores the ways in which nuns in exile maintained a connection with England. The 'outside world' was first and foremost the homeland, and not France or the Low Countries. The nuns' missionary spirit had a distinct English character, and their religious, spiritual or political activism provided one way to foster the relationship with the country they had fled.

It would be interesting to study in more detail the nuns' interactions with other English exiles and refugees on the continent, like the English travellers who stood 'at the grate' in Ghent in 1664, or the children of Catholic families sent to Catholic boarding schools on the Continent. It would also be useful to compare the English convents in exile with their Continental counterparts, for example with regards to their recruitment process. English candidates had to cross the Channel and leave behind the world they grew up in to live in relative poverty a 'stranger in a stranger land', which was therefore considered a more significant 'dying' than the vocation of Continental nuns. That could pose problems specific to a situation in exile: it was, so complained Mary Francis Gowen in the convent in Brussels, more difficult to refuse new entrants after they had bidden their family and life farewell and had made the journey. It would be equally interesting to contrast systematically the living conditions of English Benedictine nuns, for example, with their Italian colleagues. As Silvia Evangelisti has shown in *Nuns: a History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (7), the prescribed poverty did not correspond with reality in many Benedictine convents in Italy, which were often dominated by aristocratic families. Such research perspectives are evoked by the many variations of female experience for women laid bare in this book. Now that we know how different circumstances and practices were, historians can begin to compare these experiences.

The first four chapters describe survival strategies: constructing a monastic family and religious community; forming networks across religious and secular, English and continental spheres; engaging in the mission of Catholic recovery in England. To be in religious exile meant to show fighting spirit.

II.

'If you be overtaken with any sudden passion go to God immediately and desist not from prayer till you find yourself at quiet again'. Sound advice: to enter a convent in exile not only meant to 'die to the world', but also to die to oneself, to overcome one's temperament, 'hott and fyery' though it may be. Lux-Sterritt's wide range of sources takes centre stage in the second half of the book, which focuses on the personal experiences and inner lives of the Benedictine nuns.

The tension between what was prescribed and what was lived continues to be the focus of the next four chapters. An analysis of the influential writings of the Benedictine monk Augustine Baker gives way to the nuns themselves and their personal struggles with emotions that, in the Bakerite writings that circulated in Benedictine convents, were ‘gateways to a multitude of sins’ (p. 45) or at the very least hindered spiritual development. Lux-Sterritt argues that, despite this negative perception of emotions – which was predominant in 17th-century Catholicism – the nuns’ struggle with their inner lives contributed to their sense of community and that emotions served a social function: weeping communally at the death of an abbess, for example, could assist in the creation of the convent’s collective memory as much as laughing ‘together even in time of religious silence’ (p. 145). Chapter five gives space to some of those diverging struggles in the grey area between theory and practice, showing the ways nuns wrote about their emotional life: their ‘affects’, ‘humours’, ‘appetites’, and ‘passions’. Chapter six expands on divine love as a redemptory, because holistic and disembodied emotion. Here, the notion of a woman religious as ‘empty vessel’ elevated above themselves by God’s love, popular since the middle ages, comes into focus.

Writing about the inner turmoil of people in the past is a minefield at best – see, for example, the seminal volume edited by John Corrigan, *Religion and Emotions. Approaches and Interpretations* (8) as a cautious guide – but the book’s critical reliance on the nuns’ own personal writings (correspondence of nuns with relatives, remarks in manuscripts documenting daily life, diaries) makes it possible to avoid the mines of emotionology and discourse by letting the individuals’ voices be heard, nuancing the notion of the convent as entirely averse to feelings while simultaneously contributing to an understanding of the dynamic between the individual and the community. One particularly illuminating example is the use by some nuns of the first person singular ‘I’ and ‘my’ in their personal accounts as opposed to the anonymity they assumed in their other writings, providing us with first-person narratives in their own words. The result is not just an answer to the question ‘Who were the nuns?’, but rather to ‘Who were the nuns according to themselves?’.

Where the previous two chapters focused on ‘unruly passions’ within the convent and the nuns’ ‘interior castle’, chapter seven explores the complex relationship between the contemplative ideal and sensory experiences. Sensory history is a relatively pristine field of research, particularly within religious history. Nicky Hallett’s *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600-1800. Early Modern ‘Convents of Pleasure’* (9) offered an answer to the question ‘What did it mean to be sensate in an early modern convent?’ by exploring Carmelite communities in exile, and it is a question Lux-Sterritt here applies to the Benedictine convents. The Benedictine Rule limited sensory stimuli to a minimum by regulated behaviour: prescribed rules on how to stand and sit, the ideal speed for walking, fasting, chastity, silence and penance were all ways of achieving that ideal. For many nuns behind the convent walls, being able to experience the practices of Catholic religious life was nonetheless a profound sensory experience. At the same time, bodily suffering provided one way to get closer to Christ, and the body served as ‘locus of a nun’s spiritual experience’ (p. 196). Lux-Sterritt illustrates the ambiguous attitudes toward the senses by showing the authors read and copied by the nuns in exile: medieval mystics, Ruusbroec, Tauler, Blosius, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Àvila. The last chapter, then, takes the logical step to the corporeal by examining the nuns’ experiences with illness and death (and, to a limited extent, the afterlife), in particular through the lens of obituaries, hagiographies and rituals that elevated the deceased to the status of ‘a sort of relic’ (p. 243).

English Benedictine Nuns in Exile is an important work first and foremost because of its expert use of very diverging sources. The book is a celebration of the research perspectives that have become possible in no small part through ‘Who were the nuns?’ and as such evokes new research questions. It can be helpful to have the project database within reach while reading to maintain a contextualised overview. One of the major qualities of the book lies in the varied monastic landscape it shows. The entrants in the convents faced similar struggles: to build a rapport with Christ, to forsake their worldly past, to maintain an English Catholicism, to live together. But through a combination of the institutional and personal sources the Benedictine convents in the Low Countries and France are depicted as having their own specificities not only because of the different local contexts (French convents, for example, were the butt of anti-Catholic pamphlets in the homeland and of French anticlericalism), but also because of internal factors: policies, practices, nuns’ characters. It makes us think twice before drawing far-reaching parallels between convents

in exile across orders and within one order, which at the same time has the inevitable consequence that the study can at times feel somewhat limited in scope. Focusing on one Order helps the quality of analysis, though one is left wondering how the Benedictine convents in exile compared with those of other orders, and if spirituality and exile were experienced differently among other women religious.

Lux-Sterritt focuses on the aspect of enclosure and less on the other two heads of the historiographical Cerberus, exile and sex. The lived experience of exile on the Continent is observed in the background throughout the book, and for those who want to read more in-depth analysis of the profound sense of alien several articles exist that focus on particular aspects such as the language barrier or material culture.[\(10\)](#)

English Benedictine Nuns in Exile offers some helpful reading tools. It includes a list of all the nuns mentioned (including the unique identity number by which they can be looked up in the ‘Who were the nuns?’ database), a ‘family tree’ of the Benedictine convents in exile with short descriptions of each convent, and notes on the archival collections. Though Lux-Sterritt is aware of the limited scope of this book, it never feels insular or enclosed in its scholarship despite the nature of its subject. That is partly due to its focus on the tensions between religious life as prescribed and as lived, between individual and collective, between body, senses and spirit, between pan-national and national Catholicism. Partly it is also a consequence of the book’s focus on the interfaces and instances of intersection and negotiation between the nun, the convent, and the ‘outside world’. Its recurring themes – diaspora, displacement, abandon, isolation, community – are universal. But more than that, the book’s openness stems from Lux-Sterritt’s capability to portray the Benedictine nuns in exile as women of flesh, blood, and spirit.

Notes

1. Nicholas Terpstra’s *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2015); *Religious Diaspora in Early Modern Europe: Strategies of Exile*, ed. Timothy G. Fehler et al. (Abingdon, 2015); Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gabriel Glickman, *The English Catholic Community, 1689–1745. Politics, Culture and Ideology* (Woodbridge, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Brian C. Lockett, *Early Modern Catholics, Royalists, and Cosmopolitans* (Farnham, 2015).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Katy Gibbons, *English Catholic Exiles in Late Sixteenth-Century Paris* (London, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Basingstoke, 2003).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *English Convents in Exile*, ed. Caroline Bowden (London, 2012 and 2013); *The English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800*, ed. Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly (Farnham, 2013).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: a History of Convent Life 1450–1700* (Oxford, 2007).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *Religion and Emotions. Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600–1800. Early Modern ‘Convents of Pleasure’* (Farnham, 2013).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. For the former see, for example, Emilie K. Murphy’s conference paper “‘Dealing with disorder’: language barriers in English convents in exile’ at the Early Modern Orders and Disorders: Religious Orders and British and Irish Catholicism Conference, 29 June 2017; for the latter, Liesbeth Corens, ‘Sermons, sodalities and saints: the role of religious houses for the English expatriate community (ca. 1660-1720)’, *Trajecta*, 21, 2 (2012), p. 118–36.[Back to \(10\)](#)

The author responds: I am very happy with the work as done by the reviewer, who wrote a thorough and detailed piece, and to whom I extend my thanks.

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