Robert Emmett Curran

Papist Devils: Catholics in British America, 1574–1783. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 316. Pb, \$29.95.

In November of 1633, a small band of (largely Catholic) gentleman adventurers, together with two Jesuit priests and more than a hundred (largely Protestant) servants, set sail from England aboard the *Ark* and the *Dove*. Their destination was the Chesapeake Bay, where they would attempt to realize the Calvert family's new world hopes by founding the colony of Maryland. In order to take advantage of the Atlantic's prevailing winds and currents, the ships followed a southerly route, which allowed them to make port at several of England's fledgling West Indian colonies. According to the Jesuit Andrew White, at Montserrat they met a number of Irishmen expelled from Virginia "on account of their profession of the Catholic faith" (75).

This chance Caribbean encounter points to a reality seldom recognized among historians of colonial America, namely that Catholic settlement in Britain's colonies was by no means limited to Maryland and Pennsylvania. In his superb new study *Papist Devils: Catholics in British America, 1574–1783*, Robert Emmett Curran helps rectify this long-standing neglect, via an Atlantic perspective. To be sure, Curran accepts the prevailing historical consensus on Maryland's central role in colonial Catholicism, as evidenced by his decision to devote nearly half the chapters of his book exclusively to that colony. But he enriches this well-known story by placing it into the broader context of Catholic settlement in British America. When seen against the often-disastrous fortunes of Catholics elsewhere, the unique success of the community in Maryland becomes far more noticeable.

In *Papist Devils*, Curran argues persuasively that the prospects for Catholics in America changed drastically with the 1688 revolution and the ever-tighter intertwining of Protestantism with English and British identity. From the first English forays into the Americas through parliament's defeat of James II, the loosely structured, *ad hoc* character of English colonization had offered opportunities for Catholics, of which the Stuarts grant of Maryland to the Catholic Calvert family represented only the most dramatic manifestation. During the seventeenth century, tens of thousands of Catholics left the British Isles for America, many of them Irishmen fleeing persecution at home. The majority of this Catholic diaspora settled in the West Indies, where the economic prospects appeared more promising. While most Irish migrants took up subsistence agriculture, fairly similar to what they had known in Europe, some of the wealthier individuals became substantial planters, wielding considerable social and political influence.

In the years following the Glorious Revolution, anti-Catholicism became more and more pronounced in British law and culture. As Protestant colonists came to view Catholics much as they did enslaved Africans and Native American peoples—as a menacing and alien presence likely to aid Britain's French and Spanish enemies—Catholics' prospects constricted. In the West Indies, new anti-Catholic legislation together with the demographic shifts from incoming African slave labor nearly wiped Catholicism out. By contrast, communities in the mainland colonies tended to survive, yet nevertheless experiencing great political and social humiliation. Even in places where Catholics had gained various degrees of prominence, they suffered complete political disenfranchisement.

As a result of this outsider status, even the large, wealthy community of Maryland Catholics experienced the eighteenth century as a period of painful political deprivation. By 1700, Maryland had developed a creole population able to sustain its growth without further immigration, although Africans and Europeans continued to arrive throughout the colonial period. The colony's "creolized" elite not only grew wealthier through trade, but also underwent a cultural transformation, increasingly consuming British goods, reading British publications, and attempting the finer points of gentility. By mid-century, the utterly "British" Maryland elite felt entitled to treatment as equal subjects within the Empire.

Like their Protestant peers, Maryland's Catholic elites aspired to equal participation in the political process. Due not only to their great wealth—Charles Carroll of Annapolis was the single wealthiest man in Maryland, Catholic or Protestant—but also historical memories of the equality and toleration of the original Calvert government, the Catholic gentry found the political resources to agitate repeatedly, if rarely successfully, for their rights in the face of popular hostility. When crisis came in the 1770s, Maryland's Catholics sided almost unanimously with the patriot cause, which seemed to offer the best hope for the freedoms Britain denied them.

One of the great virtues of Curran's Atlantic perspective is how much it illuminates the key factors behind Catholicism's success in Maryland. As Curran shows, Catholic populations outside Maryland tended to atrophy and become more disorganized as the eighteenth-century progressed. Maryland Catholics avoided this fate, indeed, even flourished during these years, in part because of the wealth and political traditions inherited from the colony's seventeenth-century origins. Just as important, however, was the spiritual support of the Jesuits.

Outside of the Maryland Jesuit mission (part of the Society's English province), the Catholic Church had almost no institutional presence in British America. Although badly understaffed, the Jesuits maintained their own chapels in the heartland of Catholic Maryland. In areas where Catholic settlement was sparser, they rode circuits on horseback to gentry-owned chapels. With so few priests (less than one for every thousand lay persons), much of Catholic spiritual practice took place in domestic settings. Accordingly many religious responsibilities fell to the family, especially to women, who usually assumed the task of maintaining spiritual discipline and catechizing children. But even the most occasional presence of a priest seems to have given Catholicism a sustainability in Maryland that it lacked in other colonies—where many, starved of institutional support, abandoned their religion. Furthermore, the Jesuits were an important resource for the education of Catholic children and the cultivation of Catholic identity. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, Jesuit missionaries dispatched young men and women from elite Maryland families to European schools, where many found their calling to the priesthood or religious life.

One problematic aspect of Curran's study (not uncommon in works surveying the colonial period) is its ending. How does one conclude a transatlantic study of Catholics in British America? And how does one characterize the relevance of that study to the subsequent history of American Catholicism? Curran offers some thoughtful reflections on such developments as lay trusteeship, the construction of an American ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the dispersion of Maryland Catholics to the Kentucky frontier. But his conclusion that the American Revolution and the 1773 suppression of the Society cut off American Catholics from the wider Atlantic world seems overstated. Through the persistence of transatlantic networks, most notably those made up of ex-Jesuits, Catholicism in the early republic remained closely tied to broader communities.

In *Papist Devils*, Curran has masterfully synthesized the rich body of recent literature on colonial Catholicism to craft a fresh and stimulating survey. With this transatlantic history in hand, it is no longer possible to confine the Catholic presence in the British colonies to Maryland alone. From the Leeward Islands to Nova Scotia, Catholic populations—Native Americans, Africans, Germans, French, Scots, Irish and English—all struggled to sustain their faith in a society that saw them as nothing less than “papist devils.”

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