Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly (eds.)

The English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800: Communities, Culture and Identity,
Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp xxii + 282. Hb, £ 75.00.

This lively and far-ranging interdisciplinary collection performs a remarkable service in bringing to public attention a group whose lives and works have long been victim to history's silencing of women. Emerging from the "Who were the Nuns?" prosopographical study (begun in 2008 at Queen Mary College in the University of London), the present volume draws upon a database which has already produced six editions of primary-source material, shedding much-needed light on the lives and times of early modern English Catholic religious women in exile. It restores these women to their rightful place within the wider history of European Catholicism in the aftermath of the Council of Trent. It also corrects any lingering assumptions that early modern English Catholic life was a matter of fearful lurking in the shadows, a willful exclusion from mainstream, enlightened Protestant culture. Since self-effacement was built into the very nature of these women's lives, it is all the more admirable that the contributors have persevered in exploiting this rich, but largely unknown vein of information. The distinctively collaborative nature (between archivists and scholars) of much of the research lends a particularly engaging air of generosity to the corporate academic enterprise.

The geographical scope of the study is broad, ranging across the Spanish Netherlands, Cornwall and Essex, Lisbon, and Paris. The first section, "Communities," vividly illustrates the role of clan and local networks in recruiting members of the struggling English recusant community for overseas convents, as well as strengthening that community in Britain through intermarriage. Case studies, such as James Kelly's investigation of Essex, paint a distinctive picture of those who embraced the religious life against a background of doctrinal controversy at home and abroad. Letters, diaries, appeals to bishops, and admonitions among family members demonstrate the virulence and pervasiveness of intra-Catholic tensions, as, for example, in the Approbation Controversy. The meticulous recording of bequests, donations, and dowries that made entrance into religious life possible also maps out lay patronage of the Jesuit networks in England. It also explains the collapse of that network when key lay and Jesuit figures were removed from the equation. The particularity of these studies also offers a broader perspective on ecclesial life and change. Caroline Bowden's study of those who left religious life shows English convents as considerably more discriminating in recruitment than their Italian counterparts who reportedly used religious houses as dumping grounds for the

unmarriageable. Bowden considers issues of free will and vocation, in addition to the extent of the influence of the Council of Trent.

The section on the nuns' literary output shows a remarkable level of scholarship, as well as a steady desire to give voice to their lives and concerns. Whether through chronicles or spiritual writings, or through the literary figure of "the religious woman" as it appeared in polemical or metaphorical texts, nuns played a significant part in early modern popular images of the Catholic church. The figure of the nun in English literature, whether as victim of Jesuitical seductions or of a controlling regime of favoritism, spying, and domination has proved tenacious in the tropes and techniques of later periods. But detailed examinations of texts illuminate how the nuns themselves found a voice, not only in telling their stories to one another, but also in presenting the truth to the outside world. The plural authorship characteristic of nuns' writings explains (to some extent) why they have been largely ignored by modern feminist critics. Fascinating light is shed on these women's access to other spiritual works of female authorship, and on the way in which female agency, whether in spirituality or in the task of editing the works of others, flourished within the monastic context.

Convent visual and musical culture was of a high caliber, despite going largely unrecorded by scholars of the period. One of the book's delights is the lavish color illustrations that accompany the studies of liturgical and devotional outputs and practices. Geoffrey Scott's chapter on representations of English nuns—whether through portraits, dolls, or miniatures—discusses the wide variety of motives for such images, whether to further the Jacobite cause, to promote vocations and conversions, or, in the case of satire, to provide material for anti-Catholic titillation.

Necessarily concerned with minute detail rather than sweeping overview, the book is nevertheless a welcome addition to an invaluable body of scholarship.

Gemma Simmonds

Heythrop College

g.simmonds@heythrop.ac.uk

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00203005-16