Paul F. Grendler


Most books about the Jesuits tell stories of their success. The success may have been short-lived and acquired at a considerable price, but the Jesuit conquest of Ethiopia, the Society’s ‘reductions’ in Paraguay, the penetration of China, the massive conversions of Protestants in Central Europe and the evangelisation of parts of the American continent remain impressive achievements. Admittedly the Jesuits had many enemies. Admittedly too the expulsion of the Jesuits and the suppression of the Society in 1773 can be regarded as a failure. But the Society survived nonetheless and regained many of its losses in the nineteenth century. Paul F. Grendler’s *The Jesuits and Italian Universities 1548–1773*, however, tells a story which is almost entirely one of frustrated ambitions and setbacks.

The Jesuits have justly gone down in history as great educators, and it was largely to this that they owed their survival in a country such as Russia after the suppression of the Society. They were renowned for their schools which were successfully established throughout Catholic Europe. But they wanted more. Their dream was to have universities of their own. Their dealings with the Italian universities had been ambivalent ever since the foundation of the Society. The very first Jesuits had attended the university of Paris, but the members of the new Society were soon flocking to the university of Padua. Within a relatively short time, however, the view was divulged that the university of Padua was a cesspool of iniquity and certainly no place where pious boys should receive an education. In search of an opportunity to have a true institution of higher education of their own which met with their moral requirements, the Jesuits initially had high hopes of Messina. The members of the Senate wanted a university. The Spanish overlords of Sicily denied it to them, maintaining that the island already had a university in Catania, and that one was enough. The Jesuits, on the other hand, had the ear of the pope and the members of the Senate of Messina thought they could persuade him to sanction the new academy. But the demands of the Jesuits were high. They hoped that the university would be theirs, staffed by their own men teaching in their own fashion. This was unacceptable, and when the university of Messina was finally established, in 1596, it was without the Jesuits.

From Messina the Jesuits turned to Turin. There they had the full support of the duke of Savoy and they were represented by some of their best men, such as Antonio Possevino and Achille Gagliardi. Having learnt from experience, they no longer claimed the university for themselves but simply asked
for professorships. At this point they met with such opposition from the town and the university itself that the duke was forced to abandon them and they obtained no professorships whatsoever. The situation was even worse in Padua. The Jesuits had set up one of their schools in the city and it was immensely successful. That alone aroused the resentment and the jealousy of the university, but in the end it was political developments that led to the Society’s downfall. Venice was moving ever closer to France and the Jesuits were suspected of serving the interests of Spain. In 1606 all their hopes of penetrating the university of Padua were dashed when they were expelled from the entire Venetian Republic.

In central Italy the Society was more successful. In Parma, loyally supported by the acting duke, Ranuccio Farnese (who ruled in the name of his father, Alessandro, in command of the Spanish forces in the Low Countries), the Jesuits were allowed a substantial foothold in the university founded in the last years of the sixteenth century. Their success was repeated in Mantua. Again they had the support of the ruler, Ferdinando Gonzaga, and were given professorships in the university he established in 1625. But their triumph ended in 1629 owing to the death of the duke, an outbreak of the plague, and a major military defeat. It was only many years later, in 1684, that the academy was rebuilt and that the Jesuits could lay claim to what was no more than a ‘partial university.’ From such successes it would appear that the Jesuits owed their achievements to the protection of powerful ruling families, but in fact, in the Marches, they also came to terms with city councils, and obtained a number of professorships at the new, and somewhat insignificant, universities of Fermo and Macerata. They failed once again, however, despite promising auspices, in Palermo and Chambéry, where the much desired universities never materialised.

Much of the hostility encountered by the Jesuits was due to jealousy. Grenderle shows that the success of their schools was strongly resented by the universities of Padua, Bologna, Rome (La Sapienza), and even Perugia. This also affected the subjects they were entitled to teach even in their own schools—philosophy and theology, for example, were removed from their curriculum in Padua and Bologna. Nevertheless, in the late seventeenth century individual Jesuits were allowed to teach mathematics at the universities of Ferrara, Pavia, and Siena.

Even the educational methods of the Jesuits met with disapproval. Where theology was concerned—a subject which was only taught in very few Italian universities—the Jesuits, devoted to scholasticism and opposed to the biblical scholarship of the humanists, tended to be highly conservative. The same applied to philosophy. They chose to teach ‘Christian Aristotelianism’ rather