Engaging nuns: Exiled english convents and the politics of exclusion, 1590-1829


Title Engaging nuns: Exiled english convents and the politics of exclusion, 1590-1829
Type PhD thesis
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This thesis addresses the communities of English women religious founded after the Reformation on the other side of the Channel from a new perspective. In echoes of contemporary Protestant propaganda, debates about nuns remain too often framed by a discourse around themes such as passivity or the idea of forced vocations. The mere fact that women religious played a role in such propaganda suggests, however, that they also figured in debates about identity and political order. These were, moreover, debates in which nuns themselves could engage. Excluded from the secular world in their cloisters they may have been, but they were nonetheless actors both spiritually and as contributors to the wider Catholic imaginary of post-Reformation England. This is here traced through the succession of crises, from the English Civil War to the Jacobite risings, in which these exiled communities of women religious contributed to Catholic images of their Protestant-dominated homeland and significantly supported the Stuart cause. After 1750, however, with the decline of Jacobitism, the exiled convents played their part in turn in reconfiguring English Protestant images of the Catholic threat, a process that paved the way for the return of most of these communities in flight from the Jacobins of the French Revolution. This thesis thus not only demonstrates that nuns were politically active and engaged, but also contributed to the reshaping of England as an imagined space, both in going into exile in the first place, and in the way they negotiated a new modus vivendi in Britain in the years preceding Catholic Emancipation in 1829.

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Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a ‘party line’. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing.