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Compounding for survival

The Catholic gentry during the English Revolution

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Eilish Gregory, *Catholics during the English Revolution, 1642-1660. Politics, sequestration and loyalty* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021, viii + 248 pp., index)

In *Catholics during the English Revolution, 1642-1660. Politics, sequestration and loyalty*, Eilish Gregory studies the politics of sequestration and the strategies employed by the Catholic gentry in reaction to it in the context of the tumultuous period known as the English Revolution. The book, which is based on her PhD dissertation (UCL, 2017), is divided in six chapters. In the first two chapters, the complex and constantly shifting political situation and the sequestration legislation are studied in a chronological and detailed manner. Gregory shows how in the years 1642-1648, the period of the Civil Wars, the existing legislation was amended in order to deal with the changing circumstances on the ground. The sequestration laws, which prior to the First Civil War had squarely focused on recusants, non-conforming Catholics who were convicted for not attending the mandatory religious services in the Church of England, were expanded by the Parliament to include a larger range of political and religious enemies. Hence in addition to recusants, also delinquents (Royalists who took up arms in support of the king) and ‘papist delinquents’ (Catholic Royalists) were threatened with the sequestration of their estates when found guilty. In this way, the Parliament could target its opponents while creating an important stream of revenue with which it could finance its war against King Charles I.

The sequestration process was subjected to more changes during the English Republic (1649-1660), including the greater centralization and an institutional overhaul of the process. Through such measures, the Parliament aimed to expand its influence and increase the

efficiency of the whole process. Other factors, including the debates on toleration and loyalty that were waged at the same time, affected the sequestration process as well. An important result of these debates was the so-called Toleration Act of 1650, which, even though the status of Catholics remained ambiguous, provided a reprieve for English Catholics due to its conditional removal of the recusancy fines. Still, the religious identity of English Catholics continued to play an important role during the process of sequestration. For when their estates were sequestered, Catholics and delinquents had the option to compound, that is to pay a monetary fine, typically a percentage of the value of their estates, ‘in order to be discharged of their sequestration indictment’ (p. 5). However, in order for this to be possible, one had to prove his political loyalty and religious conformity, depending on the accusation(s) one had been found guilty of. In order to show this, one was required to swear one or several oaths, a well-established practice in the early modern world upon which the English state relied as well.

142 The third chapter introduces another dimension of the process of sequestration, namely the availability of news and information about this process. Articles of surrender and the legislative measures taken by the Parliament and the relevant Committees, among other sources, were treasure troves of information for those involved in the process of sequestration, and in particular for those at the receiving end of it. Indeed, in order to devise the right strategy to defend one’s interests, such information was key. The strategies employed by Catholics and their experiences are the subject of the fourth chapter, which, in the view of this reviewer, is the best of the book. Gregory carefully examines the legal strategies to which members of the Catholic gentry resorted during the sequestration process and has a keen eye for the language used in the documents, including witness testimonies and petitions, in which they presented their case and buttressed their claims. One of the most interesting findings is that it was in the interest of Catholics to be sequestered for recusancy instead of delinquency, since the fines for the latter offence were higher. Hence a number of Catholics tried to play the card of religious persecution, arguing for instance that they fled to Royalists cities and towns not because of their loyalty to the crown, but in order to prevent themselves from falling victim to religious violence.

In addition to relying on documentary evidence, Catholics also solicited the help of Protestants during the sequestration and compounding process, a topic which is addressed in the fifth chapter. Gregory here adds to the considerable scholarship on confessional coexistence in England by showing that even during and immediately after two civil wars, ties of friendship, kinship, and neighbourship between people adhering to different faiths were not severed. In fact, new hierarchies that were based on political loyalties – royalists vs parliamentarians – complicated and cut through already established hierarchies based on confessional affiliation. As different parties vied for political control, some were even willing to grant a form of ‘practical consideration’ or liberty of conscience to Catholics in order to secure their support. Just like the process of sequestration and compounding was ‘a constant evolutionary process, which adapted and changed in a fluid manner as the political situation required’ (p. 68), so was the English Revolution ‘a period of shifting political attitudes towards Catholics’ (p. 192). This is most clearly reflected in the debates in the 1650s about whether Catholics should or should not be tolerated, which are discussed in the sixth and final chapter of the book.

One of the major strengths of this study is its integration of the complex and changing political, legal, institutional, and religious dimensions of the process of sequestration and compounding while also relating it to the practical responses of the Catholic gentry to this process. As such, it provides valuable insights into the ways in which elite members of a religious minority responded to the challenges they faced and adapted their strategies of survival in a country that underwent significant political transformations and upheavals. It shows the agency of Catholics and the extent to which they actively sought to improve or at least defend their position in English society. Interesting in this respect is the discussion of oaths, one of the major themes that runs through the book. As mentioned, the English state relied on oaths to probe someone's political and religious loyalties, and oaths were part and parcel of the process of sequestration and compounding. Already prior to the English Revolution, the various oaths required by the state aroused fierce debates among Catholics, resulting in different stances on the extent to which one was allowed to declare allegiance to a 'heretical' state and ruler. Gregory analyses these debates in the 1640s and 1650s, showing, among other things, how Catholics advanced alternative oaths, initiatives which the Holy See did not always look favourably upon. However, it seems that in the process of compounding, many members of the Catholic gentry were willing to take oaths which at least some factions within the English Catholic community would have denounced. Surprisingly, this side of the story is hardly addressed in the book, despite the rich secondary literature which exists on, for example, the Jacobean Oath of Allegiance. It would have been most interesting to see which ideological positions emerged in relation to oaths in the context of the process of sequestration and compounding, a desideratum which hopefully can be addressed in a future study.

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Apart from that omission, this book skillfully brings together a diverse range of topics and will be of great interest to those interested in the English Catholic gentry and the Catholic community more widely, religious toleration, and the inner workings of the English state, among other subjects. It particularly serves an audience that specializes in the English Revolution and early modern English history more broadly. Readers of *Virtus* and others who might lack this background knowledge, would have been helped with more 'introductory' material, including a fuller explanation of the historical context and a description of the characteristics of the English (Catholic) gentry. This remark should not be interpreted as a criticism of the book, which is written for a specialist audience, but as a heads-up to the readers of this journal. However, also for those who are less well-versed in the history of the English Revolution, among whom I count myself, this book has much to offer and therefore deserves a wide readership.

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