

Michael Questier's *Catholics and Treason: Martyrology, Memory and Politics in the Post-Reformation* (2022)

Review

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Michael Questier is the most eminent scholar on Elizabethan and Stuart-age Catholicism in Britain and Ireland, with a focus on late sixteenth and seventeenth century England. He has forged new ways of looking at the Post-Reformation period in the British Isles, emphasising the faith and community of early modern Catholicism. His ground-breaking 2006 study on the Catholic familial networks of the aristocracy, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion c.1550-1640*, was a fresh look at the local politics of the Reformation and how it influenced national politics, giving particular attention to the faith of the Catholic aristocracy. Elsewhere, Questier, with Peter Lake, has considered the legacy of the trial and execution of the York Catholic woman and martyr, Margaret Clitheroe (2019). His analysis of Dynastic

Politics expunges any Whig or neo-Whig hindsight of British Political History from Elizabeth to Charles I's Personal rule with a robust narration of monarchs striving for dynastic survival, crossing confessional lines. In writing *Catholics and Treason; Martyrology, Memory and Politics in the Post-Reformation*, Questier has continued this theme, offering a skilled analysis of his sources to give a hagiographic perspective on the Post-Reformation politics and how it re-focused the lens from which Catholics have seen their place within early modern British history.

Catholics and Treason is a substantial work. Like all good history, this meticulously researched volume is not just a narrative about a seemingly distant time. It is an intellectual tour de force. It seeks not only to explore the thought processes of those who inhabited this past, it also offers an insight into the reflections of historians and historiography. And through this we can observe Questier's own thoughts about the later Reformation in Britain as he widens our perspectives about the Catholic mental landscape of the Post-Reformation world, and places it firmly in the Elizabethan and Jacobean historical context.

This is the first work on martyrology in Britain. Until now, the last major work on Early Modern Catholic martyrology was Brad S Gregory's European-wide scope published in 2001. By using the martyrological tradition to shine a light on this period of English history, Questier places English Catholic martyrology firmly in its context. Questier offers a nuanced perspective and alternative to 'Whiggish' or post-revisionist narratives using the datum of Foxe, by utilising the relatively little-known eighteenth century source, *Memoirs of Missionary Priests*, written by Bishop Richard Challoner and published in the 1740s. Following editions were published throughout the next two centuries, and this is where we acknowledge the 'memory' of this world as Questier revisits Challoner's *Memoirs*.

Through the lens of Challoner's *Memoirs*, *Catholics and Treason* offers a mirror to historians of early modern religion and martyrology, who may have previously relied too earnestly (albeit understandably) on John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. This document has been used to push a narrative of a Protestant English Reformation under siege from Catholic extremists such as the infamous Mary Tudor, whose persecution of protestants in the 1550s (almost 300 burnt for heresy) gave rise to the unwanted sobriquet, 'Bloody Mary'. This story has characterised the narrative of the Elizabethan Reformation—anxious Protestants such as John Foxe and the Puritan Divine, Samuel Clarke whose confessional perspectives were as much about not returning to the world of Mary Tudor, as celebrating Protestant martyrology. In turn, the numerous editions of Foxe's

Actes and Monuments has shaped historical narratives regarding the later Reformation under Elizabeth, then James I in England, leading to the Popish Plot and ‘Glorious Revolution’ of the later seventeenth century. In short, until the narrative analysis Questier presents here, we have seen English Reformation history through Protestant eyes. These ‘eyes’ have read the English transition to Protestantism as an inevitability after the Marian persecutions; indeed, England wanted to be rid of Rome as soon as Henry VIII wanted to control his own Bishops in the 1530s. Questier provides a challenge to these narratives.

Questier’s account of both English Catholic martyrology and Challoner’s *Memoirs* is carefully structured into three main sections. The first part traces the development of Challoner’s work until publication, in the context of Catholic accounts of the Reformation in the early eighteenth century. The second part follows the production of Challoner’s work; we start with the increasing anti-Catholic stance of Elizabeth’s Government from the Treasons Act of 1571, shifting to the period from the 1559 Elizabethan Church Settlement to the end of Elizabeth’s reign. This includes accounts of Protestant state violence against Catholic Seminary Priests, Jesuits, Mary Queen of Scots and other persecutions against the Catholic nobility, which got ‘hotter’ in the mid-1570s, culminating in the first martyr which Challoner chronicles: Cuthbert Mayne, a Seminary Priest executed at Launceston in Cornwall, in 1577. The third and final section focuses on seventeenth century martyrs, from the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to the Popish Plot of 1678. Using printed tracts, political correspondence, and other contemporary accounts, Questier re-visits and fills in Challoner’s account.

Challoner’s rhetorical narrative can itself be read, as Questier suggests, “as a commentary on the nature of tolerance and the desirability of toleration” (5), and this was how the book was established. Questier notes how Challoner gave impartial accounts of the martyrs but placed them in the wider context of English history. So Questier skilfully works back from Challoner’s magnum opus to attempt to fill in the historical gaps that Challoner was not able to do himself, whilst allowing the Catholic martyrs of the *Memoirs* to have agency of their own as historical beings.

However, Questier himself is clear in that the positioning of religion and politics in the Early Modern period is not easy; and it is crucial he has done this. Throughout the volume, he contextualises the confessional with the political – a Protestant state did not tolerate Catholics, but it may also not have actively pursued all of them. Figures such as missionary priests, or Mary Stuart were seen as a political and dynastic threat to Elizabeth’s succession. But these nuances have

not been clear in the traditional historiography and the revisionist historiography has often skipped over Catholic accounts, by arguing that the state simply coerced or absorbed the majority of non-conformists into a tolerant national church. As Questier suggests in his conclusion:

It is arguable that those within the Catholic historical tradition who helped to fashion a starkly confessional account of this topic sometimes had a clearer or at least a more vivid idea of what the later sixteenth- and the seventeenth-century confrontations between Catholicism and the State were actually about—clearer, that is, than some professional historians of the period who have tended to avert their eyes from that topic either out of embarrassment or boredom. (566)

This work will be a critical counterpoint to that position and will contribute to and inspire new studies. It will be a crucial study and reference point for all historians of Early Modern England, the British and European Reformations and Catholic history for many years to come.

WORKS CITED

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