



**Alexandra Walsham, Catholic Reformation in
Protestant Britain, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, xv + 490
p., in E-rea 14.1 (2016) <https://erea.revues.org/5430>**

Laurence Lux-Sterritt

► **To cite this version:**

Laurence Lux-Sterritt. Alexandra Walsham, Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, xv + 490 p., in E-rea 14.1 (2016) <https://erea.revues.org/5430>. 2016. hal-01434812

HAL Id: hal-01434812

<https://hal.science/hal-01434812>

Submitted on 13 Jan 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Alexandra Walsham, *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, xv + 490 p. ISBN 978-0-7546-5723-1. £80.

Laurence LUX-STERRITT
Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

en

Since the publication of her *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (1993), the prolific Alexandra Walsham has never stopped adding nuances to our understanding of early modern English Catholicism. She is also the author of *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford UP, 1999), *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England 1500-1700* (Manchester UP, 2006) and *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford UP, 2011). The prizes she was awarded on several occasions testify to the originality and relevance of her insightful contributions to the history of religion in early modern England.

This book provides a valuable complement to the monographs, since it compiles twelve of Walsham's most significant articles, all of which have been updated to take into account new evidence and to engage with recent historiographical developments. As such, this single volume, published in Ashgate's Catholic Christendom series, presents the evolution and the breadth of Walsham's research. Its first chapter is the only purpose-written piece, in which the author presents a thorough exposition of the historiography of the Catholic Reformation. Looking back upon early Catholic historiography, which she describes as a "ghetto" (4), focused solely on the men (and, very rarely, upon the women) who were actively involved in the mission, Walsham shows that this history of all but the most militant minority was written by committed Catholic scholars, with a Catholic readership in mind. That historiography, she writes, was "inward-looking and afflicted by a kind of tunnel vision" (5), and it remained, for British mainstream history, "an intellectual backwater" (6) until the landmark publication of John Bossy's seminal work, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850*. The rest of Walsham's thorough historiographical essay dwells upon the successive developments and trends in the historiography of the Catholic Reformation, starting with Bossy's study which she rightly sees as a watershed. The essay dwells upon the theory of continuity defended by Christopher Haigh in his revisions of Bossy's views, and shows the gradual disaffection of a history of the elites in favour of micro-studies often focusing on one parish or one family; such studies reveal the Catholicism of the people, which often varied –both in belief and practice– from that of the missionary priests and of the decrees of the Council of Trent.

This introductory chapter is constructed carefully in order to prefigure the areas which the author has investigated in more depth during her career, and which the book presents into four main thematic (and alliterative) sections: "Conscience and conformity", "Miracles and missionaries", "Communication and conversion", and "Translation and transmutation". Through these four sections, the book explores the various ways in which the Catholics of England, Wales and –though to a much lesser extent– Scotland, adapted to the circumstances that constrained their religious practice like a straightjacket but also acted as a stimulus and presented it with unique opportunities unknown to their continental counterparts.

Since the articles of each section will be familiar to those who have followed Walsham's work between 2000 and 2010, a detailed summary unnecessary. More importantly, it seems unbecoming to give a fragmented account of a book which is essentially about decompartmentalisation and the breaking down of artificial boundaries. For this is, to my mind, this book's essential contribution: at every turn, Alexandra Walsham breaks down the long-held yet little-evidenced caesuras between pre- and post-Reformation Catholic practice, between recusants and outward conformists, between Catholics and their Protestant neighbours, or between British Catholics and their continental counterparts. Conversely, she re-examines the assumption that lived experience was ever a perfect match for institutional directions, and she argues that the importance of Tridentine instructions has often been overestimated.

Building upon the foundations she cast with her *Church Papists*, Alexandra Walsham dwells upon the strategies which both lay and clerical Catholics developed to cope with the restrictions imposed upon them by the law. Her own work, like that of others such as Michael Questier's *Catholicism and Community* (2006), highlights the diversity of Catholic practice with regards to recusancy or conformity; it reveals a level of diversity in Catholic semi-separatism which complexifies our understanding of the Catholic community. Early modern British Catholicism can no longer be seen as a monolith, but rather must be construed as a kaleidoscope, in which the practice was often idiosyncratic, and at times even evolved from conformity to recusancy and vice-versa.

Yet, if occasional conformity was a highly effective strategy of survival, it was also a point of controversy, the object of much fear in anti-Catholic publications, and of much anguish and debate amongst Catholics themselves. Conformity touched upon the definition of confessional identity, facing many subjects of the crown with an ethical dilemma which Walsham calls "ordeals of conscience" (103). It also questioned political allegiance and the issue of loyalism, which Stephania Tuttino has studied. Moreover, Walsham shows that we must not continue to consider English society as clearly divided along confessional lines. Communities interacted constantly, more or less successfully, more or less willingly, but the representation of a confessional divide which was inviolable ignores the flexibility, the pragmatism, and the fluidity of the relationships between Protestants and Catholics in early modern England. As Ethan Shagan has demonstrated, Catholics did, in fact, contribute to the building of the nation and of its politics; at local level, they continued to be influential in county politics, even when key English members of the Society of Jesus were involved in international plots and in the writing of political theory justifying the primacy of the pope over the English monarch. Walsham convincingly shows that there existed a complex and nebulous world at the interface of the polarised stances of conformity and loyalism or resistance and subversion.

Adaptability, resourcefulness, but also continuity, are also keywords in Walsham's study of the strategies implemented for an effective mission; focusing, for instance, upon miracles, pilgrimages and the role of angels, the author shows that the supernatural played an important part in the attractiveness of Post-Reformation Catholicism in England and in Wales. The case of Holywell illustrates the elite's tactical decision to build upon the foundations cast long before the Catholic Reformation, to foster popular attachment both to cult and place. Arguably, the supernatural and elements of Pre-Tridentine or pseudo-pagan tradition were instrumentalised in the mission for their power to edify, stimulate and convert. In her studies, Walsham demonstrates that the historiographical insistence upon the Council of Trent as an effective watershed which reformed and transformed Catholic practice has been greatly overstated.

One of the book's leading arguments is that practices were reorganised and recast in order to integrate the restricted access to priests and sacraments. In another historiographical myth-busting effort, the author goes against the long-held assumption that Catholicism was not a religion of the book. Walsham highlights the immense influence of printed works in a mission where clergy were sometimes difficult to obtain and where books played the roles of "dumb preachers" (133). She insists upon the importance of the rise of reading and writing literacy; she dwells upon the role of scripture in the vernacular as well as printed polemics, in conjunction with older modes of communication, to show that in this respect also, the old and the new worked in unison and were not mutually exclusive.

This book is therefore a precious publication for any scholar of early modern Catholicism, or indeed of early modern religion at large. I will register only one regret: although the title announces a study of 'Britain', the focus is clearly on England and Wales, with limited reference to Scotland and Ireland. This is due to the very nature of this publication, which gathers articles centred upon England and Wales without the addition of new case studies. However, this book demonstrates once more Alexandra Walsham's ability to draw bridges between domains which have long been thought separate; with this in mind, one can but hope that she will, in time, produce an in-depth comparative study of the British dimensions implied by her outstanding research.