

John Edward Fletcher. *A Study of the Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher, "Germanus incredibilis": With a Selection of His Unpublished Correspondence and an Annotated Translation of His Autobiography.*

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In 1966 a young English scholar of German literature, John Edward Fletcher, completed a Master's thesis at Queen Mary College, University of London on the seventeenth-century German Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–80). At over 900 pages, Fletcher's thesis must surely rank among the most impressive scholarly projects written by someone who never received a doctorate for his herculean efforts. Between 1966 and his untimely death in 1992 Fletcher wrote about twenty articles on Kircher, his library, his projects, and his correspondence, and edited an important volume on *Athanasius Kircher un seine Beziehungen zum gelehrten Europa seiner Zeit* (Wiesband: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988). His work became an essential foundation for the study of Kircher, but Fletcher never published his thesis.

Thanks to the efforts of his colleagues — Garry Trompf, Brian Taylor, and Joscelyn Godwin — and especially his wife, Elizabeth Fletcher, Fletcher's thesis has finally become a book. *Athanasius Kircher, "Germanus Incredibilis"* includes an edited, updated version of his 1966 study that has incorporated Fletcher's handwritten additions to his thesis, translations of Latin quotations, and the silent correction of bibliographic errors by a team of scholars who poured over the manuscript. Godwin's foreword and Trompf's introduction situate Fletcher's research in light of subsequent work on Kircher and introduce Kircher himself. The volume also includes Fletcher's annotated English translation of Kircher's *Vita*, a complete bibliography of Fletcher's publications, and an impressive bibliography of the materials used by Fletcher and his editors to study Kircher. By any measure, this is an important contribution to understanding one of the most fascinating and enigmatic figures to emerge at the end of the Renaissance.

Despite the editorial quirks of publishing a work of scholarship forty-five years after it was written (based on deciphering Fletcher's notoriously difficult handwriting), the most important thing to say about Fletcher's thesis is how well it has stood the test of time. This project was undertaken not only at an early stage in Kircher studies but also when allied subjects such as the Society of Jesus, the Thirty Years' War, Renaissance Hermeticism, the Scientific Revolution, and the Republic of Letters were still in their infancy. We need to step back into the scholarship of the mid-twentieth century to understand what it took for a young English researcher to reconstruct Kircher's intellectual itinerary, discovering numerous manuscripts for the first time as he explored archives throughout Europe in search of Father Athanasius. I am personally humbled by the *Wissenschaft*, imagination, and just plain *Sitzfleisch* that this entailed, making it all the more important that

Fletcher's most comprehensive and enduring contribution to Kircher studies finally appears in print.

Fletcher's approach to Kircher gives far greater significance to his German upbringing and formation than many recent studies in English, Italian, and French that have focused on his mature years in Rome. Fletcher is concerned with the world Kircher entered, via Avignon and Rome, fleeing the Germany of the Thirty Years' War, and the world he never entirely left behind. We know something of his surviving brothers (all in religious orders) and an impoverished sister who married a Calvinist but perhaps remained Catholic. Following Kircher's projects and correspondence, we have a far greater sense of how former colleagues and students from Kircher's early years in the German Jesuit colleges continued to reappear in later episodes of his life. While there are a number of details in Fletcher's account that recent scholarship has refined and corrected, the essence of his biography and his detailed analysis of Kircher's polyglot correspondence remains unaltered. The result is an intellectual treasure trove: dive into any chapter and you will discover a finegrained analysis of yet another facet of Kircher's world. My only regret is the high cost of the book which will make it accessible only to well-endowed libraries and devoted specialists. Let us hope that a more affordable paperback edition will appear soon.

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