

emphasis on reason and on morality, his tolerance and ‘his unique personal belief system’ (p. 239) based on a minimalist set of doctrines. His dismissal of the incarnation perhaps receives less attention than it might, but his beliefs are duly defined in relation to other writers and thinkers including John Selden, Arminius, Socinus and Grotius. However, the characterisation of English Calvinism and of Herbert’s relation to it are not always convincing. His ‘strict Calvinist’ upbringing is often invoked but never fully traced, while the associated disinclination for dancing or gambling which is inferred did not apply to all among the pious gentry. ‘Austere Calvinism imposed by the state’ (p. 20) is questionable as a generalisation about the Elizabethan Church, while to say that James I’s ecclesiastical inheritance ‘retained its Catholic liturgy’ (p. 49) or that Laud planned to reverse ‘the stealthy Puritan reformation of the English church’ (p. 294) does not quite capture the situation either.

Notwithstanding such reservations, this study of Herbert represents a valuable addition to scholarship. The writer who stepped out of his aristocratic ‘comfort zone’ (p. 217) to publish his work, and who expressed views so much at variance with those appearing in the contemporary press, is worth a close look. Yet the man who embraced both traditional military values and multifarious Renaissance accomplishments, who moved in many different spheres, who advanced inconsistent arguments and whose behaviour could be unappealing and self-destructive, defies easy categorisation.

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*Writing habits. Historicism, philosophy and English Benedictine convents, 1600–1800.* By Jaime Goodrich. (Strode Studies in Early Modern Literature and Culture.) Pp. xvi + 222 incl. 3 tables. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2021. 59.95. 978 0 8173 2103 1

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Current scholarship has rescued the continental English Catholic convents of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from an unfortunate tradition of historical misrepresentation. All too often decried as peripheral and insignificant institutions, their members supposedly isolated, and removed from mainstream society, this view has been replaced in recent years thanks to more nuanced investigation. Studies have revealed that British and Irish nuns in the ‘convents in exile’ were plugged into contemporary international political, philosophical and theological movements, convent life affording these women tangible opportunities for self-expression and self-fashioning. Jaime Goodrich’s *Writing habits* examines one of these modes of self-fashioning, examining the literary endeavours of the English Benedictine convents in northern France and Flanders between the years 1600 and 1800.

Goodrich’s work presents an analysis of textual production in six English Benedictine houses (Brussels, Cambrai, Dunkirk, Ghent, Paris and Pontoise). Many of the women who inhabited these houses were prolific writers, and they left a considerable literary legacy, with over 1,000 works extant. Yet, as Goodrich says herself, the book’s aims go beyond recovering purely the ‘historical’; readers are told that it participates in a ‘lively critical conversation by using the

lenses of historicism and philosophy to analyze textual production' (p. 2). She interweaves a philosophical analysis that will no doubt be a novel and, at times, challenging approach for many readers. Central to her methodology is her adoption of the work of a twentieth-century Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, which is used 'in order to understand God's role at the heart of these cloistered communities' (p. 2).

Whilst this fusion of historicism with contemporary philosophy might be a new departure for some, Goodrich's reasons for doing so are laudable, citing the all too often neglect by scholars of the spiritual and faith dimension of nuns' lives. That such a neglect exists might seem strange, but, as the author points out, scholarship frequently interprets (or perhaps more correctly, misinterprets) female monastic piety as an expression of gender and politics. Goodrich's attempt to take seriously the centrality of faith to these communities and the women who inhabited them is one of the book's most dominant and commendable themes, which she attempts to tease out through an analysis of the nuns' administrative, communal and devotional texts.

In the book's four chapters (each of which examines a specific category of writing), the author fuses textual and philosophical analyses. The focus of chapter i is what is described as 'administrative writing and communal formation'. Here the author suggests that administrative documents (these included account books, statutes and Rules, and timetables) had a dual purpose, serving not only as documents of record, but also, significantly, aiding the formation of communal spiritual formation and identity. The women under investigation were drawn from across the four nations of the British Isles (with some coming from as far as North America and the Caribbean too), from diverse political, social and cultural backgrounds, and it was through these works, Goodrich argues, that a communal spiritual unity was nurtured. Administrative writing, far from being one-dimensional, we are told, was vital to the construction of what is described as the '*Gemeinschaft*', the social theory constructed by Ferdinand Tönnies. In this regard, Goodrich suggests it was a monastic *Gemeinschaft* that revolved around the daily worship of God.

Chapter ii looks at another genre of convent writing, that of spiritual text and liturgical rites. Some of these documents will perhaps be more familiar to readers, making it less of a challenge than the opening chapter, because of a change in analytical frame. The English Benedictine houses (both female and male) were known for the wealth of spiritual texts that they produced, designed largely for individual consumption, although within a communal setting. Benedictine nuns did not take a homogeneous approach to spirituality though; the communities at Cambrai and Paris opted to follow the example of their *confrère*, Augustine Baker, whose spirituality called for the total abandonment of self in the act of prayer, whilst other houses followed the more active and formulaic Ignatian model of spirituality. The final section of the chapter offers a fascinating analysis of the ways in which the Ghent Benedictine nuns compiled accounts of their personal modes of contemplation, yet another example of the 'individual' feeding into the 'communal'.

In following chapter Goodrich discusses '*Life-writing*'. Benedictine communities had a venerable tradition in the field of history-writing, 'in order to document their

shared past for the benefit of future generations' (p. 90). Fusing the past with the future was central to the creation of communal identities, a claim which runs through all the book's chapters. Goodrich demonstrates that this was not only done through the writing of community histories, such as the history compiled communally in 1695 by the nuns at the Paris convent (based on memories and written accounts), but also through the practice of reading death notices. Readers might be surprised to learn that obituaries were one of the most important forms of *Life-writing* within the convents, 'second only', Goodrich claims, 'to the genre of statutes in their ability to establish corporate identity' (p. 95). Teasing out the construction, reception and significance of death notices is one of this chapter's great strengths.

In the final chapter Goodrich quells any temptation that readers might have to view these works as having only limited impact. Here she illustrates skilfully the ways in which these nuns, allegedly 'dead to the world', not only spoke to secular audiences, but also, through polemics, influenced wider religious, secular and political debates. The breakdown in the monastic order that ensued from the Protestant Reformation in some respects forced the nuns to enter into the world of what she calls 'imagined communities that substituted a virtual communion with the English Catholic counterpublic for spiritual fellowship of the cloister' (p. 126).

The book ends with an afterword, rather than a conventional conclusion: 'Notes toward a feminist philosophical turn.' This is a call which may not sit easily with her earlier assertions that 'recent scholarship has moved beyond the search for proto-feminist foremothers' (p. 3). Notwithstanding this criticism though, this book is a more than welcome addition to an ever-expanding field of the history of early modern female religious.

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*The National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, 1660–1696.* By James Walters. (Studies in Early Modern Cultural, Political and Social History.) Pp. viii + 213 incl. 2 ills. Woodbridge–Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2022. £75. 978 1 78327 604 2

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The National Covenant of 1638, to which most Scots subscribed to oppose the religious policies of Charles I, and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, or the military alliance between the English Parliament and Scotland to extend Presbyterian church government to England and Ireland, have long been regarded as formative documents in British history. Both documents have recently been subjected to fresh scholarly insights by historians such as Laura Stewart and Edward Vallance who have demonstrated how the covenants facilitated an unprecedented level of public engagement and were subject to different interpretations by the people who subscribed them. James Walters's book builds on these recent historiographical advances by investigating how the covenants were perceived in the decades after the Restoration of the Charles II in 1660 when both documents were proscribed.