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Review of Elisabeth-Marie Richter, *England und der Index der verbotenen Bücher im 19. Jahrhundert*

by Joshua Bennett

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ELISABETH-MARIE RICHTER, *England und der Index der verbotenen Bücher im 19. Jahrhundert*, Römische Inquisition und Indexkongregation, 21 (Leiden: Brill/Ferdinand Schöningh, 2021), x + 638 pp. ISBN 978 3 506 70474 0. €120.56 / \$US 147.00

At the outset of his ascent from struggling writer and lapsed ordinand to second English pope, George Arthur Rose, the hero of Frederick Rolfe's 1904 novel of semi-autobiographical fantasy, *Hadrian the Seventh*, confesses a long litany of sins to a bishop. 'In regard to literature', he admits, 'I have read prohibited books and magazines—the *Nineteenth Century*, and books ancient and modern which are of a certain kind . . . my motive always has been to inform myself.'<sup>1</sup> Among its other discoveries, Elisabeth-Marie Richter's impressive new book on the relationship between England and the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* during the nineteenth century makes clear that the conflict which Rolfe's half-fictional creation experienced between the allure of modern knowledge and the duty of obedience was far from unusual among English Catholics of Rolfe's generation.

Focusing in the first instance on the juridical processes by which English books came to be placed on the *Index*, and second on the views which English Catholics themselves took of the institution, *England und der Index* has a significance which extends beyond its central concern with the history of ecclesiastical censorship. For that history also opens new windows into the history of nineteenth-century English Catholicism, and the European impact of British intellectual and religious life.

Richter's book is the twenty-first volume to appear in Brill's invaluable series *Römische Inquisition und Indexkongregation*, under the general editorship of Hubert Wolf. In common with the rest of the series, *England und der Index* is one of the fruits of the 1998 opening of the archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a vault still replete with treasure for the ecclesiastical, intellectual, or book historian. Known from its foundation in 1542 until 1965 under the more fearsome title of the Congregation of the Holy Roman and Universal Inquisition, or Holy Office, it shared responsibility for book censorship with the smaller Sacred Congregation of the Index. As Richter explains,

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), *Hadrian the Seventh* (New York, 2001), 50.

this 'little sister' (p. 47) of the Inquisition kept the *Index* up to date, ruled upon questions of interpretation, and granted selective permissions to read its forbidden contents, prior to its full integration with the Holy Office in 1917. The *Index* continued to grow until it condemned its last book in 1961. Paul VI abolished it five years later. Codified into something like a formal procedure under the quasi-Enlightenment pope Benedict XIV, the *Index's* stately workings could not keep pace with the huge expansion of the modern book trade, but the authorities lost none of their premodern vigour in prohibiting works injurious to the faith during the nineteenth century. Prominent among these were works of English provenance. Expertly navigating both the inquisitorial archives in Rome and the Westminster Diocesan Archives in London, Richter presents the English encounter with the *Index* from both the curial and the English points of view. Using sources in German, English, French, Italian, and Latin, she integrates the archival trail with close comparison of different editions of texts brought within the *Index's* compass in order to analyse why, exactly, one edition of the same work earned censure rather than another. Following scholarship of this high order is one of the rewards which the book brings to the reader who possesses the opportunity to read its 551 pages of main text.

In a way that will be helpful for readers coming to the subject for the first time, the book begins with recapitulations of the history of post-Reformation English Catholicism and of the Roman apparatus of censorship. The obligatory discussion of the current state of research follows, before Richter's target comes into arresting focus with a fascinating table (pp. 74–81) of the English books which went before the Holy Office or the Congregation of the Index between 1815 and 1899. Of these a number were forbidden, whilst others were scrutinized but ultimately not included in the *Index*. To the Victorianist on the Clapham omnibus, the list of works which the Curia decided to censor could appear eclectic, even slapdash. Books were censored, but so were sermons and even individual journal articles, including a series of essays by St George Jackson Mivart on 'Happiness in Hell' in the *Nineteenth Century* (p. 81)—perhaps the inspiration for Rose's confession in *Hadrian the Seventh*. Hugh Trevor-Roper's mischievous description of the *Index*—'that incomparable roll of genius'—could only be applied at a stretch to such proscribed texts as George Combe's

*System of Phrenology* or William Stroud's *Treatise on the Physical Cause of the Death of Christ* (pp. 78, 81).<sup>2</sup> Although the *Index* condemned a number of what posterity would regard as nineteenth-century classics, such as John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (p. 79), many great Victorian works are passed over in silence: neither Leslie Stephen nor Charles Darwin earned a mention.

This table of prohibited works will be of great interest to scholars of nineteenth-century British intellectual culture. It also suggests certain difficulties with Richter's justifiable, but inescapably thorny decision to focus solely on 'English' books, in the sense of 'England's literary production' (p. 5). The quotation marks around 'English' are necessary, because the author decides to include Scottish works, marked with an asterisk, in the table alongside books originating in England. Richter argues that this is a fair inclusion in a book about England, because despite Scotland's separate ecclesiastical polity, Rome perceived it, together with England, as a heretical Protestant country. Ireland, by contrast, was a different case, being an overwhelmingly Catholic nation, and so Irish books are not mentioned. Richter's principles of selection are, at one level, quite reasonable. But British historians may have found it helpful had she taken the opportunity to include Irish books in the ledger, for there was substantial interpenetration between English and Irish Catholic intellectual culture in the period. On the Protestant side, close links existed between Anglo-Irish Protestants and England's Anglican elites, whilst Presbyterians in Ulster and Scotland moved freely across the North Channel. Indeed, as Richter goes on to note, two of the authors whom she discusses at greater length in the book—Laurence Sterne and Lady Sydney Morgan—themselves had Anglo-Irish backgrounds. A composite table, including all English, Scottish, Irish, and (perhaps implausibly) Welsh works that came before the censorial gaze, might have better reflected the porous nature of the boundaries between the literary, religious, and intellectual cultures of the United Kingdom's four nations.

This quibble is, however, a minor one, for it does not impede the reader's appreciation of the heart of Richter's book. Rather than focus

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Introduction', in id. (ed.), *Letters from Oxford: Hugh Trevor-Roper to Bernard Berenson* (London, 2006), p. xxxv.

on all the fifty-four listed works, an embarrassment of riches which could have produced a relatively superficial treatment of her subject, she instead identifies four case studies. Leaving to future historians the philosophical, historical, theological, and political-economic works which attracted the attention of the censors, she instead attends to four case studies of the Congregation of the Index's response to 'literature in the narrower sense' (p. 84). The first is the eighteenth-century Anglican cleric Laurence Sterne's 1768 *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, a novel relating the mainly amorous touring experiences of the author's alter ego, Reverend Mr Yorick, and placed on the *Index* in 1819. The second is the rationalistic Anglo-Irish author Lady Sydney Morgan's 1821 travelogue *Italy*, banned the next year. The third is Mary Martha Sherwood's evangelical Anglican work of children's fiction *The History of Little Henry and his Bearer*, published in 1814 and indexed in 1827. The fourth and final work singled out for attention is Percy Bysshe Shelley's posthumously published 1839 *Poetical Works*, the only one of the selection ultimately not prohibited in this way, in a decision of 1852.

Richter examines the English background and reception, Continental translation or dissemination, and censorial consideration of each of these works in a way that makes her book both a fascinating example of comparative reception history and a forensically argued study of the variegated complexities of papal censorship. Her findings are important, and often surprising. Throughout her account, Richter is concerned to reconstruct the intellectual personalities and mental world-views of the consultors appointed by the Congregation to report on suspicious books. They emerge as generalists, with little specific background in English affairs; hence their judgements were often rather light on the texts' contexts, or derivative of others' opinions. Intriguingly, censors' moral objections to problematic works often resembled those of conservative English Protestants, despite their doctrinal differences. Thus the curial consultor echoed earlier English readers in faulting Sterne for making light of religion and scripture. Where censors did not explicitly recommend proscription, this did not necessarily imply toleration, still less approval. Shelley's poems escaped the *Index* not because they were doctrinally harmless, but because the Congregation decided they were already prohibited according to the Tridentine 'second Index rule' (p. 427), according to

which works of heretics that treated religious questions stood under a general ban on perusal by the faithful.

Whilst the censors' awareness of English works was notably patchy, Richter winks out the patterns which account for why certain works came to be of interest and others passed out of view. In most cases, little is known of the precise route through which individual works were denounced to the censors. But the Curia showed especial vigilance in defending the reputation of Italy and the Papal State against the calumnies of heretical authors. Hence it was no accident that Sterne, Morgan, and Shelley all deprecated the religious condition of Italy. An English work generally also had to appear in French or Italian translation before it attracted critical notice. This reflected both the censors' limited intelligence on the world beyond Rome and their more immediate concern to safeguard Catholic peoples rather than to police Protestant ones. The nature of the translation could also prove significant. Sterne's translator, Ugo Foscolo, made his prose more intolerably erotic than the English original, whilst one of the censor's main objections to Sherwood's *Little Henry* was that the Italian translation came from a Protestant Bible society. The fact that works were treated in translation helps to account for the often striking delay between a work's original publication and its consideration for the *Index*. It was not the sole explanation, however, for why English works came in for critical attention at moments of heightened anxiety. Shelley, unusually read in the English original, faced the censors shortly after the restoration of the English Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1850.

How far did Catholics heed the *Index's* admonitions in practice? In the penultimate chapter before her conclusion, Richter poses this question in relation to the English Catholic hierarchy at the close of the nineteenth century. She argues that knowledge of the *Index* was notably slight among the English Catholic community at large. The most senior clergy—here especially Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, archbishop of Westminster from 1892 to 1903—regarded it as both impractical to enforce and counterproductive to evangelism. Unsuccessfully lobbying Rome to release the English church from the authority of the *Index*, Vaughan considered that English Catholics had to meet non-Catholics in free debate, unencumbered by the allegations of obscurantism which the *Index* invited. Richter convincingly argues that this difference of

opinion points to the limits of Romanization within English Catholicism after 1850. Where curial censors habitually thought in terms of the protection of Catholic nations from unbelief, English Catholics, more used to a free press and a religiously plural society, hoped for a less constricted response to modernity. Ultimately, this would be the approach that won out during the period of the Second Vatican Council.

Richter's imaginative, scrupulous, and authoritative work on the history of Catholic censorship is a model of its kind, presenting meticulous scholarship in engaging prose. A weighty contribution to a distinguished and vigorous series, it also opens up several new areas of inquiry for future research in nineteenth-century British and European intellectual and religious history. Richter herself urges the more thorough consideration of the reception which the *Index* obtained among English Catholics beyond the episcopate, among the parochial clergy, laity, and in Catholic educational institutions. It would be exciting to extend our understanding of the censorial process beyond the literary works upon which Richter concentrates, to integrate the works of history, theology, philosophy, and political economy which also came within its purview. Whether the ultimate omission of a dubious work from the *Index* did indeed always leave it under the general ban of the second rule, or whether a more accommodating response to certain non-Catholic English authors can be detected in some cases, may be a question worth pursuing. The book deserves to find a wide readership with Anglophone historians, among whom knowledge of German is regrettably no longer as widespread as it once was. Perhaps some way can be found of including English-language summaries in future volumes in the *Römische Inquisition und Indexkongregation* series, so that contemporary scholarship does not fall victim to modern forms of the intellectual parochialism which Richter historicizes so instructively.

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