

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Bowden, Caroline (2012–13), and Michael Questier (2008–11), principal investigators. Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile 1600–1800. Database

Jaime Goodrich

Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081146ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37050>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Goodrich, J. (2021). Review of [Bowden, Caroline (2012–13), and Michael Questier (2008–11), principal investigators. Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile 1600–1800. Database]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(1), 170–173.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37050>

© All Rights Reserved Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

founded during the early modern period to open their membership registers to the public via ROLLCO. Whether this or any other sort of further phase of the project would be possible/impossible remains uncertain. ROLLCO's website is clearly active, which means that its web hosting and domain are being duly renewed. In contrast, some external links are regrettably missing or broken, and plans to upload ad hoc statistics have never been fulfilled. Information on the "Home" and "Project" pages was updated, fully, around six years ago; in consequence, the site's welcome message claims that "the database includes information [...] for ten (*sic*) of London's Livery Companies" ("Home"), while the addition of the membership archives of the Founders and the Stationers in 2015–16 is mistakenly overlooked ("The Project: Introduction"). These errors and omissions give the impression that ROLLCO has been partly discontinued or put on temporary hiatus. Hopefully, this will never happen. Research projects such as ROLLCO are necessary for the study of the early modern world. If this review results in more scholars and researchers turning to ROLLCO's database of London livery companies' apprentices and freemen, that would be very welcome.

JOSÉ MIGUEL ALCOLADO CARNICERO

University of Cantabria

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37049>

Bowden, Caroline (2012–13), and Michael Questier (2008–11), principal investigators.

Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile 1600–1800. Database.

Birkbeck: Queen Mary University of London, 2009. Accessed 28 July 2020.

wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk.

During the seventeenth century, over twenty convents were established on the Continent for Englishwomen who wished to become nuns but could not do so in their native country because Catholicism was illegal. These institutions became important cultural and religious hubs for English Catholics, and they remained on the Continent until the French Revolution forced most of the nuns to return to England around 1800. Despite their contemporary significance, the

convents only began to receive sustained critical attention at the end of the twentieth century, partly because of the dispersion of the nuns' records. The award-winning prosopographical database *Who Were the Nuns?* (WWTN) has played a major role in this scholarly subfield by providing biographical information on the women who joined English cloisters between 1600 and 1800. Since WWTN went live in 2009, this free digital resource has transformed the study of early modern English nuns by facilitating a surge of historical and literary scholarship on the convents that shows no signs of abating.

The primary value of any digital database lies in the quality of the data it presents. By this measure alone, WWTN is not only a remarkable success but also a model for other prosopographical databases. With funding from the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Council, the project team gleaned biographical information for nearly four thousand nuns from hundreds of records scattered in archives across Belgium, England, France, and the United States. Requiring both extensive travel and knowledge of multiple foreign languages (Dutch, French, Latin), this ambitious endeavour was well beyond the capacity of any one person and ultimately involved a team of eight contributors. Thanks to their efforts, scholars now have an authoritative and easily accessible resource that provides essential information for anyone seeking to undertake research on individual nuns or convents.

In terms of user experience, the interface of WWTN is both efficient and easy to navigate. The home page allows for quick searches of individuals by surname or place association, but a search page offers two additional options with more comprehensive menus: 1) searching for individuals by their given name, religious name, surname, convent, profession date, or place association; 2) searching for members of convents by institutional location, religious status (e.g., choir nun, lay sister), profession date, monastic office, or place association. Users can therefore search the database to find information on a particular nun, to identify all of the abbesses from a specific convent, or to locate nuns from certain geographical regions. As a result, the search interface allows for queries that reflect a wide range of potential approaches in handling the site's data.

Once users have located an individual, the site provides as much biographical information about her as possible, using the following template: birth name, religious name, birthdate, death date, parentage, convent joined, clothing date, and profession date. The database also identifies works written by or dedicated to individual nuns, as well as any surviving images of these women.

Biological connections to other nuns in WWTN are noted with hyperlinks to relevant entries, and many entries contain detailed family trees. Finally, many entries offer transcriptions of obituaries and profession notices, and all entries list their archival and scholarly sources.

The project team has also analyzed its dataset and published the results on the “Analysis” page. Through quantitative analysis of the nuns’ biographical information, the team presents new insights into the following topics: why some nuns decided to leave the convent; what characteristics were common to monastic officeholders; what variations exist in terms of the social status of nuns’ fathers; and what associations the nuns had with specific regions. Additional analysis of the data for seven convents sheds light on two major historical phenomena: convent composition (entries and professions by decade, estimated size of the community over time) and convent life cycles (the ages at which nuns professed, the length of their monastic careers). While users are sure to find these analyses very fruitful, they also reveal the many ways that the data in WWTN can be mined by future researchers.

Other pages on WWTN serve as crucial gateways for supplying the public with information about the English convents. The “Convent Notes” page (accessible through a link on the “About” page) offers an indispensable list of the English convents founded on the Continent along with thumbnail sketches of their histories, from foundation to dissolution, return to England, or survival on the Continent. This list will be an essential starting point for anyone wishing to begin researching these institutions. On the “Publications” page, the project team makes available a variety of key historical documents about these cloisters. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Catholic Record Society published a number of important editions of convent records, including obituaries, profession notices, and histories. Under the heading “Texts,” WWTN provides downloadable and searchable PDF transcriptions of these publications, giving easy access to material that is now often difficult to find. Another invaluable source of information on this page is an archive calendar under the heading “Sources,” which lists the holdings of Continental archives used by the project team. Under the heading “Maps,” WWTN offers several useful visualizations of the data, including a series of maps (one of which is based on Google Earth) showing the geographical origins of the nuns within England, both during specific periods of times and at particular convents. Two scholarly pieces under the heading “Articles” introduce users to the cultural,

educational, and historical contexts of the English convents. At the very bottom of the page, an unassuming link entitled “Lists” leads to a page with a wealth of valuable information, including PDFs listing the members of each convent as well as tables naming known confessors for each house. Unfortunately, two of the links appear to be dead (“Converts” and “Family Trees”).

Despite its many virtues, a few aspects of WWTN could be improved. First, a number of recent scholarly publications cite the project’s identification numbers for each nun. However, there is no easy way to search by or locate these numbers, which do not appear in the search functions or the entries themselves but rather in the PDF lists of each convent available through the “Lists” link at the bottom of the “Publications” page. If the database featured these identification numbers more prominently and consistently, it would encourage their common usage and facilitate further scholarship in this field. On a related note, the “Lists” page itself is easily overlooked despite the significance of the information it contains. Placing this link in a more obvious location would help signal its importance. Finally, the family trees in WWTN have been superseded by a CD-ROM accompanying *English Catholic Nuns in Exile 1600–1800: A Biographical Register* (Prosopographica et Genealogica 2017), a printed version of the database’s information that has been edited by team member K. S. B. Keats-Rohan. Given that the CD-ROM itself is now an outdated form of media, it would be ideal if these new family trees could also be incorporated into the website, where they would reach a much broader audience.

Overall, WWTN is a robust digital database that offers crucial information about a long-neglected but culturally important group of English women, while also providing a wide variety of ways to engage with its extensive dataset. Winner of the 2014 award for Best Digital Scholarship, New Media, and Art Project from the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women and Gender, WWTN sets a high standard for future prosopographical databases and demonstrates the many ways that digital projects can help shape the contours of particular scholarly fields. Scholars from the fields of history, literature, religious studies, and women’s studies will find much to admire and to learn in this site.

JAIME GOODRICH

Wayne State University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37050>