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[See table of contents](#)

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Before taking a closer look at the online, open-access presence of the Catholic Record Society (CRS), it is worth briefly considering its history, which stretches well beyond the present digital age. For almost 120 years, the CRS has been publishing a wide variety of archival documents pertaining to the “long” early modern Catholic history of England and Wales. Traditional historiography sees the end to early modern Catholicism in Britain in 1829, when the Catholic Emancipation Act lifted the remaining legal proscription of Catholicism. CRS publications routinely venture into the nineteenth century and occasionally even beyond the 1829 cut-off date, such as volumes 77 (the correspondence of John Lingard) and 85 (the correspondence of Alexander Goss) of its records series.

While always in pursuit of scholarly excellence, the early decades of the Society were defined by its confessional bias and hagiographic approach to the Catholic past. In the early twentieth century, a scholarly book series of sources relating to post-Reformation Catholic history would not have been possible had the members of the Catholic community themselves not taken special pride and interest in the lives of their persecuted forefathers. At the time, British Catholic history was on the margins of the discipline. So while the main aim of CRS was to preserve and publish scattered primary sources for future historians, the impulse to overtly celebrate the heroic age of recusancy—“when English Catholics took their lives in their hands and kept the faith in spite of the rack and the gibbet”¹—was an integral part of the project’s early decades.

The years following the Second World War saw the expansion of CRS’s publications portfolio—the records series was joined by a journal and a monograph series—and several shifts in its identity and scholarly focus. This is best represented by the metamorphoses of its flagship journal. In 1951, CRS began publishing *Biographical Studies of English Catholics*, which was renamed *Recusant History* in 1959. The journal’s strictly prosopographic writing gave way to historical research focusing on a community, whose defining characteristic was recusancy: a sustained refusal to attend Protestant worship in spite of heavy

1. Gasquet, introduction to *Miscellanea* 1, viii.

finer imposed on the absentees by the Crown. In short, the scholars around *Recusant History* perceived and practiced Catholic history as a history of recusants, a community defined by the repressive legal structure of the state and passionate nonconformity of its members. With *Recusant History* and a number of influential monographs by historians such as John Bossy, Christopher Haigh, and John Aveling, British Catholic history began its journey from the margins towards the mainstream.² This shift was completed in the early twenty-first century, after Alexandra Walsham's revision of the recusancy paradigm and Michael Questier's and Peter Lake's confident integration of British Catholics into the larger history of the period.³ Finally, in 2015, *Recusant History* was appropriately renamed to *British Catholic History*, now published by Cambridge University Press. The rebranded periodical fully embraced its role as a household journal of the new expanding, interdisciplinary, and transnational field of early modern Catholic history, of which most of its contributors were already a part.

To a large extent, CRS's records series and its journal facilitated the transformation of the discipline's attitudes towards early modern Catholic history in Britain, enabling this dynamic research field to come of age, as Francis Young has recently put it.⁴ The records series in particular represents a unique and vital body of published primary sources and reference material for the study of British Catholicism, so the decision of the Society to make the first 79 volumes of the series freely available on their website through the electronic publishing platform Issuu (issuu.com) is indeed laudable. Digital (re)publication of the series offers unprecedented access to the material, which, although routinely available in the better-stocked academic libraries in the UK and North America, remains difficult to come by on campuses in Continental Europe.

What sort of sources can we expect to find in the CRS volumes? First, it is important to note that all documents published in the records series are always presented in full and in their original language (often with a supplementary translation). The core of the series is formed by its early *Miscellanea* volumes and the collections of registers, diaries, and other institutional documents from

2. Bossy, *English Catholic Community*; Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance*; Aveling, *Handle of the Axe*.

3. See Walsham, *Church Papists*; Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion*; *Catholicism and Community*; Lake and Questier, *Antichrist's Lewd Hat*.

4. See Young, "Surveying a Field."

the religious houses and colleges on the Continent. *Miscellanea* contains a wide variety of dispersed and unique sources such as memoirs, autobiographies, lists of Catholic prisoners and recusants, mission registers, hagiographical material, correspondences, and family papers. They are essential to any prosopographic research, inquiries about Catholic culture, and even statistical analysis. Among the Continental college material we find, for example, the indispensable *Liber ruber* of the Venerable English College, which records the admissions of new students to the seminary (vols. 37 and 40) and the extant Douay College diaries (vols. 10, 11, and 28). Again, these sources are essential to any study of the social and family background of missionary priests and more broadly to that of the everyday life of the exiled communities. Such traditional sources are further enhanced by useful reference material, such as Thomas M. McCoog's biographical summaries of English and Welsh Jesuits for the period between 1555 and 1650 (vols. 74 and 75), or the indispensable studies of recusancy rolls by Hugh Bowler and J. LaRocca (see vols. 57, 61, and 76). In the last two decades, the variety of sources published by the series has expanded in line with the wider developments in the field. However, the majority of these volumes (10, since 2007) have been published by Boydell and Brewer and remain out of the public domain.

Previously, a number of earlier CRS volumes were available digitally through the Internet Archive platform (archive.org). The new official digital publication of the first 79 volumes substantially expands access, both in terms of quantity and quality. The volumes can be accessed either directly through the Society's website, or through Issuu. However, searching on Issuu can be fiddly, and the best way to go about finding the CRS publications is to amend "Result type" from "Publications" to "Stacks." This way the whole series can be found and accessed in just a few clicks.

Issuu offers a great search function within individual volumes. Recently, I have been tracking seminarians in the financial records of the Venerable English College (VEC), and having the option to search for students' names within the digital versions of *Liber ruber* and *Responsa scholarum* has had a very positive impact on my workflow, enabling me to discover information quickly and navigate between unpublished documents in the VEC archive and printed sources in the CRS volumes. That said, Issuu does not offer a search function within a specific series or "Stack," as it calls them. I wish I were able

to search for a personal or place name within the whole corpus of CRS's 79 volumes. This, alas, is not possible.

Thinking about the lack of an adequate search function within the CRS series as a whole made me realize how the issue extends beyond the narrow focus of this review. The availability of open-access databases or digitized sources for British Catholic history is growing, and while this trend is admirable, the question of how we organize, present, and use the ever-expanding online resources is more pertinent than ever. A more comprehensive and coherent solution, which would bring all or most of the available sources under one digital roof, would indeed be desirable. Such a solution might be on the horizon at the Venerable English College in Rome. Professor Maurice Whitehead, director of heritage collections at the VEC, and Ellen Charlesworth, a data scientist and doctoral researcher at Durham University, have recently launched a project that aims to establish a virtual library hosted by the VEC. Moving ahead with cataloguing and digitization of the VEC library and archive, they are also looking at ways to join up the huge amount of existing, but difficult-to-find, online collections pertaining to English and Welsh Catholicism so that researchers can find the digitized resources—CRS volumes included—more quickly and search through them more efficiently. The VEC portal is still in its initial stages, but it promises to be truly transformative to the research practice in the field.

The decision of CRS to offer the vast majority of their records series on an online, open-access platform is certainly having a positive impact on scholarship, although more could still be done to increase its usability. However, the best solution to the problem of accessibility and usability of digital resources relating to Catholic history might have to be more ambitious, extensive, and collaborative in nature.

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