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### Russell, Camilla. Being a Jesuit in Renaissance Italy: Biographical Writing in the Early Global Age

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**Russell, Camilla.**

***Being a Jesuit in Renaissance Italy: Biographical Writing in the Early Global Age.***

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 280 + 6 photos, 1 map. ISBN 978-0-6742-6112-9 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

What was it like to be a Jesuit formed in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? To answer that question, Camilla Russell has investigated a rich collection of biographical records in the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus (ARSI). The Italian scene, historically, was worth the candle. One statistic reveals its prominence for the recruitment of Jesuits: “at the Society’s most important novitiate, S. Andrea al Quirinale, in Rome, over 3,340 men and boys are registered as having entered between 1556 (when records began) and 1640 an average of thirty-nine per year” (6).

Russel draws on various genres of primary sources to trace the *Lebenslauf* of Jesuits in Italy from entrance into the Society to their departure, mostly by death but also by other means. These documents comprise entrance records; vocational narratives; the increasingly studied *Litterae indipitae* or petitions for ministry in mission territories; reports on missionaries; personnel records of Jesuits who ministered in Italy; a catalogue from 1573 about Jesuits in the Society’s province of Lombardy; the correspondence of superiors general along with the confidential *solì*; the autobiographical memoir of Giovanni Battista Eliano, a convert from Judaism; records of dismissal; death notices; and a record of “woeful outcomes” (169) of those who left the Society or who, despite their vocation, never entered it. Out of these records, with a nod to Brian Stock, Russel constructs “textual communities” (16) of Jesuits with individual and corporate identities.

Research into the *Litterae indipitae* and related documents demonstrates Russel’s analytical facility. Her focus is on Asian missions, where Italian Jesuits, although a minority, constituted a significant presence: “they became a byword for quality and the preferred choice for augmenting the much larger but stretched Portuguese cohort in Asia” (58–59). Temporal coadjutors (lay brothers) were especially in demand because of their skills. The impact of the Italian Jesuits owed much to Alessandro Valignano, who entered the Society in 1566 and received in 1573 the commission from Superior General Everard

Mercurian to reform “the entire Jesuit mission operations in Asia” (33). He promoted the sending of Italian missionaries in part to increase the control of the Asian missions from the superior general in Rome. Russel’s investigation of the “spiritual Orientalism” (62) of Italian Jesuits reveals a zeal to bring Christianity to Asia even to the point of martyrdom. Religious zeal, humility, and devotion mixed with practical considerations in the discernment of which petitions to approve. Whether or not a Jesuit needed to support relatives at home in Italy served as a prominent factor. Provincials, moreover, were reluctant to lose talented men to the missions. On occasion, petitions received replies from the superior general. This correspondence revealed “the dialogic nature of the Society’s operations and a shared set of values about the missions, from the most junior members of the Society to the most senior” (69). Hierarchy existed alongside consultation. Russell notes “familial closeness between members” (72) and filial affection for the superior general as a father figure.

Two metaphors, one mural the other arboreal, convey the corporate cohesion represented by the various primary sources. “Correspondence networks,” Russel writes, “were the mortar that held the Society’s bricks together” (116), overcoming the distance that separated Jesuits. The sources evinced an “easy style, deep bonds, and open disagreements and battles of will” (117). “If the walls of the Society were made of moveable paper bricks,” Russel continues, “these documents’ authors were the building itself, joined through their correspondence” (117). The Ignatian tree was the more pervasive metaphor. Russell regards the documents that the Jesuits produced about themselves “as though they were branches in a tree” and traces “a number of common features to their roots—the Society’s foundational texts” (2). The Society of Jesus “was like a family” and thus “the Ignatian tree represented the Society as both a spiritual and genealogical family tree” (176).

Russell roots her analysis of Jesuit sources in two texts: the Society’s *Constitutions* and the *Spiritual Exercises*. She understands the vocation statements of aspiring Jesuits as “textual continuators” (49) of these two fundamental documents. Recourse to the *Constitutions* illuminates textual production. They required aspirants to “write their own statements” (29) as part of the process of seeking admission to the Society, promoted corporate unity and bonds of friendship in the obligation of the exchange of letters, and outlined the reasons for and the procedure of dismissing members from the Society. Empiricists will find Russell’s frequent associations between her sources and the *Spiritual*

*Exercises* less compelling. How, for example, do reports about and reflections by Jesuit missionaries demonstrate that a shared “vision of Asia” was “drawn from the *Spiritual Exercises*” (94) or that correspondence by missionaries “served to illustrate the application of the *Spiritual Exercises* across the spokes of the world” (114)? What is the concrete evidence for these claims? Russell relates Jesuit ideas about gender and women to the *Exercises* in the chapter “On the Italian Home Front.” But her analysis of Jesuit identity in the relevant sources misses the place of gender in them and must still prove that these sources represented the *Exercises* “in practice and embodied” (145).

I shall note a small matter for correction. Russell quotes from a letter written on 22 November 1554 by Ignatius of Loyola to Peter Canisius, identifying the latter as “the provincial of Vienna” (137). On 3 November, Pope Julius III had appointed Canisius for a year’s term as administrator of the diocese of Vienna, but Vienna had no Jesuit provincial. Ignatius appointed Canisius the first provincial of the Upper German province in 1556.

Russel’s methodology merits emulation for other geographical and temporal contexts in Jesuit history. Tracing the course of life within the Society through the documents of the Jesuit archives can give researchers the opportunity to delineate not only an intramural Jesuit consciousness but perhaps also a Jesuit identity in relation to the Church and the societies within which Jesuits ministered. *Being a Jesuit in Renaissance Italy* has blazed a trail in Jesuit history.

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