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 ***God's Traitors: Terror & Faith in Elizabethan England* by  
Jessie Childs (review)**

Kenneth J. Zanca

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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*Kenneth J. Zanca*

Jessie Childs brings to us, with vivid storytelling and in-depth scholarship, the heroic witness to Catholic faith in a time of persecution. Modern readers, so complacent in constitutional protections of religious liberty, will be awakened by this chronicle of another time when the once-established Catholic religion was struggling **[End Page 408]** to stay alive in a Protestant England afraid of Catholic plots from within and Catholic Spain's attempts to reassert the ancient faith by invasion.

The book follows the activities of two generations of the Vaux family—their co-religionists of the noble classes (some thirty-one families) and everyday members of their households—through the arc of Elizabeth's reign, which, as far as English Catholics were concerned, could be divided into two epochs: before and after the failed (and subsequent) armadas of 1588.

The poles of this pre/post armada span can be denoted by two quotations given by the author. The first, asserting the intention of the Jesuit-led reclamation/resistance, is from Edmund Campion's *Bragg* (1580): "So the faith was planted, so it must be restored" (p. 43). The second, stating the consequence of these efforts, is from John Whitgift, archbishop of Canterbury, who in 1588 said: "We are disgraced, defaced, confined from our native countries, imprisoned, impoverished, forsaken of friends, triumphed upon by foes, scorned of all men" (p. 164). In the aftermath of the failed invasion, seventeen priests, nine laymen, and one woman were executed to pay for "the time of fright and rumour" (p. 160).

At first, Elizabeth was timid in her persecution of Catholics, attempting only to starve them out by advancing the purification begun by her brother, Edward VI, ridding her kingdom of priests—hence, killing the sacramental life essential to Catholic piety and practice. Later, after Pope Pius V's bull (*Regnans in excelsis*, 1570) excommunicated her and basically gave Catholics permission to disregard their sovereign's laws,

the queen and her government became more vigorous and determined to suppress any fifth-column subversions, and there were many between 1569 and 1605.

Childs documents how the Catholic faithful offered lodgings, funding, escort, cover, and the protection (priest rooms) of host families to the priests who served them from 1574 through the “Jesuit invasion” of 1581 and beyond. In the process, she describes daily Catholic life under the wary eye of Protestant officials, “relic traffic” (p. 175), scruples over relaxing fixed canon-law regulations regarding celebration of Mass, notorious exorcisms, star-chamber trials of accused Catholic nonconformists (“recusants”), and their punishments and executions. She provides nuanced and moving accounts of Vaux family members and of Jesuits-in-charge of the reclamation project: notably Edmund Campion and Henry Garnet. (These Catholics lived by what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, many centuries later, would call “costly grace.”)

An ironic footnote to the success of Elizabeth’s anti-Catholicism and the subsequent secularization of England is the fact that Harrowden Hall, the Vaux family estate in the Midlands and the center of Catholic resistance to Protestantism, is now the site of the Wellingborough Golf Club.

This work is essential reading for all Catholics interested in history but especially for American Catholics. The history of anti-Catholicism in the United [End Page 409] States, from the first British settlement until the Civil War, is attributed to the conflicts between English Catholics and Protestants in the “old country” precisely during times recounted in these pages. Hostility to Catholicism was embedded into laws of all thirteen colonies, and that spirit of animus endured until Catholics and Protestants died on the same battlefields defending their respective causes.

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an astonishing old age, dying in 1611, having experienced the growth of the order throughout the world.

Ribadeneira's original text is something of a headache for librarians, as he produced numerous editions of this work in both Latin and Spanish. Translator Claude Pavar has very reasonably opted for the "approved" (third) Latin version of 1586, even though a fuller Spanish edition has dominated the Spanish-speaking world ever since it was published by the author in 1605, largely because of the sheer mastery of the language: Ribadeneira's works coincided with the flowering of Spain's Golden Age of Literature. In his introduction, the translator mentions the fidelity with which Ribadeneira uses his sources. These are easy to identify: the key letter of Diego Lainez to Juan Polanco, which was the first biography of Ignatius and was written in 1547, almost ten years before the death of the saint; Polanco's own account that added many comments to that letter; the *Memoriale* of Gonçalves da Câmara; and the reminiscences dictated by Ignatius shortly before he died in 1556. However, Pavar cautions the reader about the slant given by Ribadeneira in this work. It is, in fact, more than a "life" and attempts to present the "works" of Ignatius, tracing in considerable detail the early history of the Society of Jesus. Ignatius is here frequently presented in military terms, and the "battle" with the Protestant Reformation is described in vivid, even bombastic language. Many modern readers will note with raised eyebrows the views of Ignatius on the potential dangers of studying Hebrew; and even more his warning against any close association with women. As a historian, Ribadeneira may have aimed to be objective and factual—and at times, he succeeds—but his hagiographical enthusiasm for his subject tends to exclude critical reflection. Such partiality affects the account of early Jesuit expansion, remarkable though that was. The work is divided into five books: the first four give a chronological account of both the life of Ignatius and the spread of the Society; the fifth concentrates on the virtues of the saint and follows the description of the ideal Superior General that Ignatius had inserted into the *Constitutions* of the Society. The indefatigable Ribadeneira also wrote extensively elsewhere on the institution—defending its originality—and published shorter lives of saints, including one on Ignatius. Among the papers he left behind are Notes on the *governance* of Ignatius that still await an English translation (now in preparation by this reviewer), but this biography remains his *magnum opus*.

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*God's Traitor: Terror & Faith in Elizabethan England.* By Jessie Childs. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xxiv, 443. \$29.95 clothbound, ISBN 978-0-19-939235-3; \$13.19 ebook, ISBN 978-0-19-939237-7.)

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