

Prosperity and Plunder

In the Catholic countries of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe, communities of monks and nuns were growing in number and wealth. By 1750 there were at least 25,000 communities containing at least 350,000 inmates. They constructed vast buildings, dominated education and played a large part in the practice and patronage of learning, music and the arts. They also fulfilled an amazing variety of political, economic and social roles, notably in providing career opportunities for women. Yet many accounts of the period ignore them altogether.

Prosperity and Plunder recovers this forgotten dimension of European history, assesses the importance of monasteries across Catholic Europe and compares their position in different countries. It goes on to explain the almost complete destruction of the monasteries between 1750 and 1815 by reforming rulers, 'Enlightenment' and the French Revolution, and asks how much society gained and lost in the process.

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Joseph Gerstmeier, view of Melk abbey from the Danube, 1845

Prosperity and Plunder

European Catholic Monasteries in the
Age of Revolution, 1650–1815

DEREK BEALES



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FOR SALLY,
WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE

Dialogue on Soldiers and Monks

- A: Isn't it dreadful to reflect that we have more monks than soldiers?
B: What you mean to say is that there are far more soldiers than monks.
A: No, no, more monks than soldiers.
B: You may be right about one or two countries of Europe. But in Europe overall? If the peasant sees his crops destroyed by slugs and mice, what does he think is dreadful about it? that there are more slugs than mice? or that there are so many slugs and mice?
A: That I don't understand.
B: Because you don't want to. What then are soldiers?
A: Protectors of the state.
B: And monks pillars of the Church.
A: Confound your Church!
B: Confound your state!
A: Are you dreaming? The state! The state! The state guarantees happiness to every single member in this life.
B: The Church promises everyone salvation after this life.
A: Promises!
B: Idiot!

(G.E. Lessing, c. 1778)

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P R E F A C E

This book is a much expanded version of the Birkbeck Lectures in Ecclesiastical History which I gave in the Michaelmas Term 1993 under the title *Lazy Monks and Philosophic Spoilers*. I have retained the lecture form in which it was originally conceived.

I owe profound thanks to the Master and Fellows of Trinity College for inviting me to give these lectures. In so honouring me they presented me with a glorious opportunity to study more deeply a subject which had long fascinated me. I am further indebted to the College for its great generosity in making me a grant that has enabled me to include coloured illustrations in the book. Among the Fellows of Trinity the late Dr Robert Robson and Dr Boyd Hilton lent unstinting support, and Professor Roger Paulin presided graciously over the lectures.

The founder of the Birkbeck Lectures, Mrs Anna Margaret Mednyanszky, was the daughter of George Birkbeck, creator of the Mechanics' Institutes that offered part-time education to working men in nineteenth-century Britain, and half-sister of William Lloyd Birkbeck, Fellow of Trinity and F.W. Maitland's predecessor as Downing Professor of the Laws of England. She published a book entitled *Rural and Historical Gleanings from Central Europe* (1854). When I had cut the pages of the University Library's copy, I discovered it to be a passionate defence of Hungary, especially Protestant Hungary, for which her husband, Colonel Mednyanszky, had fought against the Austrian oppressor in and after the 1848 Revolution. It is unlikely that she and her family would have relished courses of lectures on Counter-Reformation Catholicism. But her book does contain one favourable reference to an abbey, the Benedictine abbey of Tihány on lake Balaton, where she tells us the abbot dispensed truly Hungarian hospitality even to English Protestants. In saying this she provides evidence for several of the arguments I shall be putting forward.

PREFACE

Since my interest in this subject has caused surprise, I should perhaps try to explain it. It was fired at first by the inspiration and example of the late Brother Peter, OSF, who while I was at Bishop's Stortford College introduced me to the Dorset house of the Anglican Franciscans. A less direct but continuing influence has been my passion for Baroque organs and their music, nurtured for more than fifty years by the late Mr Bertram Bayford. Another friend made at school, Mr Roger Peers, has ever since fostered my interest and delight in architecture and music. As an undergraduate I heard the spellbinding lectures of the late Dom David Knowles on medieval monasticism and the late Sir Nikolaus Pevsner on German and Austrian Baroque.

Many members of my College have helped to develop my interest. The late Dr R.C. Smail taught me most of what I know about medieval Christendom. The charisma of the late Dr Royston Lambert communicated to me some of his enthusiasm for Baroque, as for so many aspects of the arts. I have never forgotten an essay written for me in or around 1958 by Mr Fred Murphy, in which he argued powerfully that historians (including myself) exaggerated the importance of the handful of early Jesuits and neglected the impact of the larger cohort of later centuries. My first slides of German Baroque monasteries were given me by Professor Stanford E. Lehmberg; my first visit to any of them, in 1962, was made in the company of Dr John Reid; they and Mr Martin Thorpe have continued to encourage my work in this field. Professor Tim Blanning has shared with me over the last forty years his profound knowledge of eighteenth-century Europe, and by his kindness in reading and commenting on the typescript of the book has much improved it. I have profited from Dr Christopher Page's learning and enthusiasm, while Professor Barry Nisbet made me aware of Lessing's wonderfully apt *Dialogue on Soldiers and Monks*, and he and Mr Tom Wyatt have given me invaluable help with translation from German and French. I owe a special debt to the wisdom and friendship of two former Fellows, Professor Simon Dixon and Dr Benjamin Thompson, and three Visiting Fellows, Professor Carlo Capra, the late Rev. Professor Donal Kerr and Professor Hagen Schulze.

The Rev. Professor Owen Chadwick has encouraged me personally and through his *The Popes and European Revolution*, by far the best book in English on the Catholicism of Europe in the eighteenth century. I have benefited enormously from Professor Peter Dickson's work and advice, though I hasten to absolve him from any responsibility for my use of statistics. As this book turned into a comparative study, I incurred many further debts, so many over such a long period that it is difficult to include everyone. But I owe particular thanks to Dr Nigel Aston; Professor Éva Balázs; Professor Robert Baldick; Lady de Bellaigue;

PREFACE

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Mr William Davies of Cambridge University Press has not only shown remarkable patience but has also taken a great interest in the book, giving most generously of his time and expertise in obtaining the photographs.

My greatest debt is recorded in the dedication. My wife Sally made the project possible, entering into my enthusiasm, driving me to numerous French, Swiss, German, Austrian, Italian and Czech monasteries, joining me in visits to many more, particularly in Spain, and giving me support in countless other ways.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHY	<i>Austrian History Yearbook</i>
AP	<i>Archives parlementaires</i>
ASVNV	<i>Archivio segreto vaticano, Nunziatura Vienna</i>
BL	<i>British Library, London</i>
DIP	<i>Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione</i> , ed. G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca (Rome, 1973–)
FRA	<i>Fontes rerum austriacarum</i>
HHSA	<i>Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna</i>
HJ	<i>Historical Journal</i>
MIÖG	<i>Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung</i>
MÖSA	<i>Mitteilungen des österreichischen Staatsarchivs</i>
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
ZBL	<i>Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte</i>