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***The Commentaries of Pope Pius II (1458-1464) and the Crisis of the Fifteenth-Century Papacy*, by**

**Emily O'Brien (Toronto Buffalo London: Toronto U.P., 2015; pp. xi + 335. £65.00).**

**978-1-4426-4763-3**

Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), famous fifteenth-century humanist author and patron, is renowned for his autobiographical *commentarii* (the *Commentaries*), composed in the period from summer 1462 to spring 1464. Anyone reaching for it to capture a flavour of fifteenth-century life in the Italian states will be amply rewarded with colourful descriptions and animated anecdotes. Yet readers beware! His writings should not be taken entirely at face value. As Emily O'Brien skilfully and comprehensively demonstrates, the *Commentaries* is a tip of the iceberg, a large proportion of the man and his ages sometimes intentionally rendered invisible below the waterline. O'Brien's book is recommended to scholars of history as a requisite reading companion to the *Commentaries* to reveal some of that submerged context – the titular ecclesiastical crisis that underpinned and partly gave rise to the writings of this politically astute and dynastically ambitious renaissance scholar-pope, who was situated - as O'Brien observes - right at the eye of the storm.

From the outset of her study, the *Commentaries* is flagged up as falling within the genre of *apologia*, alerting to the dangers of an uncritical reading as a reliable record of historical fact. O'Brien's aims are succinctly summarised: 'What purpose this defence [the *Commentaries*] serves, how it is constructed, and how we should understand its larger significance, both historically and historiographically, are the driving questions of this book' (3). She further promises 'to elucidate a pivotal moment in the history of the papacy' (4), showing how 'one pope sought to construct his own self-portrait when the papacy's very identity was under fire' (5-6). Only in the last three decades has a modern edition of the Latin text become available, scholars previously drawing largely on a heavily censored sixteenth-century first edition. The rationale for this new publication is therefore its ability

to dissect new editions and translations of the *Commentaries* and Piccolomini's earlier letters and treatises: it calls on an abundant raft of published and unpublished primary sources. O'Brien's philological scrutiny takes place with the aid of up-to-date scholarship on the shifting political and spiritual landscapes of fifteenth-century Europe. This publication reinforces O'Brien's established reputation as a specialist in her field and offers invaluable new insights into humanist literature, church history, the workings of Piccolomini's mind and the political minefield through which he was treading.

The book is structured into two parts, the first (Chapters 1 to 3) mapping out in detail the situation that Piccolomini inherited, indeed had helped to shape, when he first ascended the papal throne: it charts the challenge to papal sovereignty, and his part in it, over the three decades of his pre-papal career. Introduced to conciliar theory in 1432 at the Council of Basle, he became a leading and vocal advocate of it. O'Brien meticulously teases out the nuances of Piccolomini's relative position at the time of his various writings, a position that frequently subtly shifted according to changing historical factors and personnel, his intended readership and ascendant career. The second part (Chapters 4 to 6) consists of textual analysis of the *Commentaries*, cross referencing text to context, as laid out in the first part of the book. Each chapter in the second part picks up the main themes of the book, namely the papacy's need to maintain authority, legitimacy and relevance. Chapter 4 examines the *Commentaries* in relation to conciliarism. Chapter 5 analyses the work in respect of the threat to the pope's spiritual authority from secular princes, hence the need for, and ambiguity of, the pope as a temporal ruler. Chapter 6 shows how and why, in representing the papacy and his own pontificate, the author of the *Commentaries* drew on humanist portrayals of contemporary secular rulers. What defines this from earlier studies is recognition that Piccolomini was at variance with the Roman Church for longer than has previously been realised; also of the full extent to which he needed to distance himself, as pope, from his words and deeds in the whole of his pre-papal career. The book strengthens recent scholarship showing that there was still in the mid-fifteenth century a looming groundswell of conciliar support, highlighting the urgent need for Pius to be on

the offensive. This fresh assessment of the *Commentaries* positions it in direct relation to this threat, thus throwing into prominence the extent of Pius's pro-papal proactivity. It explains where in the historical narrative, and why, he turns up the volume and where within it, and why, he whispers or is mute. Corroborating the silence-as-self-preservation strategy is the lack of reference in the *Commentaries* to urgent calls being made on the church, not addressed during Pius's incumbency, to reform the Julian calendar, by now astronomically incorrect by eleven days, which had serious ramifications on the date of Easter and the ensuing liturgical year. As O'Brien concludes, 'For Pius the historian, truth did not consist of an impartial account of events. Truth meant *his* truth ...' (221).

In charting Pius II's 'dance of diplomacy' regarding ecclesiastical sovereignty, O'Brien has herself had to accomplish some complicated choreography, given that she is analysing a lengthy, complex and multi-layered text against swiftly-moving political tectonic plates. She thus justifies the structuring of the book into its two component parts which, while inherently logical, necessarily leads to frequent cross-referencing, hence a degree of repetition. Nonetheless, this can be forgiven for the sake of scrupulous thoroughness. The author thus successfully orchestrates this kaleidoscopic material, providing clear signposts between chapters and sub-sections and helpful – though not cumbersome – endnotes. She navigates the reader through the meanderings of Piccolomini's own ideological journey; from his early assertion that 'The pope is inferior to the council in all matters' (49), through a phase of pragmatic compromise, to his striving for autocratic control as pontiff. In her textual analyses, O'Brien assesses the effect of her subject's calculated choices of literary genre for his strategic manoeuvring, whether letter, dialogue or prose memoir for example, and the intentionality of the presence or absence of the authorial voice. She identifies the seemingly astonishing *volte-faces* peppered throughout his writings; the trading of personal insults; character assassinations and the authoritative, sometimes arrogant, tone that Piccolomini chose to adopt, in order to carve out for posterity the enduring, if mythical, image of Pius II, his pontificate and the temporal and spiritual unassailability of the papacy.

Piccolomini lived and wrote in a period when secular rulers' allegiances were increasingly defined by their own political borders rather than by the spiritual community of Christendom, the *respublica Christiana*. It is apposite that this book has appeared at a moment when the question of sovereignty and politico-cultural belonging is once more on the tip of our collective tongue, though in a twenty-first-century context.

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