

# Loyola's Childhood

*by Claire Bouvier*

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**The history of the Jesuits is well known, while that of their founding father is less so. A nobleman, soldier, pilgrim and missionary, the young Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus in 1534, a symbol of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. This biography looks beyond the saint to rediscover the man who was first and foremost a strategist, both idolised and condemned by his contemporaries.**

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**Reviewed:** Enrique García Hernán, *Ignace de Loyola*, translated into French by Pierre Antoine Fabre, Paris, Seuil, 2016, 576 pp., €20.99.

The Spanish modernist historian Enrique García Hernán, an expert on the Society of Jesus, set out to discover the man behind the saint in the first in-depth biography of Ignatius of Loyola written by a non-Jesuit author. Thanks to the French translation provided by another major specialist of the Ignatian order, Pierre Antoine Fabre, French-speaking readers can now follow the eclectic itinerary of Iñigo, the Basque who, in 1622, became Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

The Spanish edition came about through the “Españoles eminentes” (Eminent Spaniards) project supported by the Juan March foundation. The project aims to fill the historiographical vacuum that exists in Spain with regard to biographical studies, by providing a broad readership – not necessarily limited to the academic world – with access to a series of works on several major figures of Spanish history. The goal is to “regain the perspective of personal ethos in historical explanation, while departing from the old political, diplomatic or military narrative made up of genealogies, treaties between princes and battles.” (p. 6)

This methodology, which breaks with structuralist history, may not be new in the field of historical studies, but its subject is certainly innovative: Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus.

This regular Order, constituted by Paul III in 1540, was distinguished by its fundamentally missionary spirit that followed the apostolic model. This study of Ignatius' life story also provides an analysis of the early stages of this new religious institution, which met the demands for spiritual renewal laid down by the Catholic Reformation.

This work of biographical – indeed historiographical – reconstruction runs through the book's nine chapters in chronological order, from the first entitled “The Basque man from Loyola” to the last, devoted to his “Successes and failures”. In the epilogue (“The eminence of Ignatius”), the author highlights the extreme fragility of the newly established Society on the death of its founder in 1556. It was then beset by infighting<sup>1</sup> and was the target of external attacks that ushered in an era of new challenges for the religious institution.

To carry out his project, the author benefited from the work of his predecessors (listed in the bibliography at the end of the book) and used a wide range of sources. In addition to internal documents belonging to the Society of Jesus, Enrique García Hernán combed a number of archives, mostly Spanish, in order to better grasp the historical depth of his subject. The kaleidoscopic narrative of certain periods can sometimes prove disconcerting for the reader, particularly in the first chapter, which revisits the training period of the young nobleman and courtier and presents portraits of numerous protagonists in sequence, intertwined against a backdrop of noble rivalries and dynastic struggles. Nevertheless, as well as a dynamic, well-constructed narrative, the book's abundant erudition enables the reader to accurately situate the vital stages of young Iñigo's life story and understand how his experiences and multiple relationships made it possible for him to establish the Society of Jesus.

## **The man behind the saint**

During the 1990s the history of the Society of Jesus opened up: research into the Ignatian Order was carried out by secular historians – not just Jesuits, as in the past – who did not so much endeavour to understand the history of the Society by means of an institutional approach but rather to understand the history of modernity through that of the Society.<sup>2</sup> Even so, the figure of the Society's founder was almost entirely overlooked by this scientific revival, until now.

The first “official” biography of Ignatius was written by the polygraphic Spanish Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1526-1611) at the request of the Superior General Francis Borgia (1565-1572). It was published in Latin in Naples in 1572, and was translated into Spanish by

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<sup>1</sup> Michela Catto, *La Compagnia divisa. Il dissenso nell'ordine gesuitico tra '500 e '600*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See the “Présentation” by Pierre Antoine Fabre and Antonella Romano in “Les jésuites dans le monde moderne. Nouvelles approches historiographiques”, *Revue de synthèse*, 1999/4, p. 247-260.

its author as early as 1583 then republished several times during his lifetime. Literary portraits of Ignatius of Loyola then began to multiply. A number of biographies embraced the hagiographic genre and responded to one of the great undertakings of the Society of Jesus which, once its founding father had become a saint, sought to establish its position on the religious chessboard of the time. Others resorted to the polemical genre, joining the long tradition of anti-Jesuitism that began as soon as the Order was founded.<sup>3</sup> The first sharp criticism came largely from Dominican priests who condemned the new Society and its founder for its “heterodox” tendencies: deviations from Thomism, the practice of Spiritual Exercises likened to direct communication with God, with no mediation by the church authorities, specific aspects of the Jesuit institute with respect to other regular Orders (General Superior elected for life, the lack of a choir or any rules regarding penance, diversity of vows, and therefore of ranks within the Order, duration of the novitiate), etc. The figure of Ignatius was reduced to a model to follow (as a Counter-Reformation saint) or to fight against (as a heretic).

Breaking with the “paradigmatic model of a perfect life in all respects, a life of heroic and public exemplarity, of which all proof can be provided” with “nothing secret, false or obscure” (p. 23) Enrique García Hernán does not seek to “demask a saint” (p. 34) but rather to understand *who* Ignatius of Loyola was and how he managed to found and build the Society of Jesus. As the author states:

What we know of him is that he was not a man of war, although a soldier, nor a nobleman of great notoriety, although he knew others; he was not an exceptionally gifted student or writer, although his Spiritual Exercises have been published multiple times and translated into almost every language. Nor was he very personable, and was constantly sick. In these pages, I would like to try to understand how the Society of Jesus could have been founded in these painful conditions. (p. 23)

As Pierre Antoine Fabre points out in his presentation, it was because “the saint has fallen into the public domain” that the Spanish historian was able to highlight the specificity of Ignatius of Loyola, namely his outstanding qualities as a mediator. The French translator rightly points out that

This book has, I believe for the first time, the decisive merit of aiding our understanding of the Ignatian enigma by unveiling this charismatic shift in its most detailed progressions, and could only have done so by re-immersing “Saint Ignatius” in the inextricable skein of a lifetime of relationships in which the mystery of this man continues to be fulfilled: he is forever *in their midst*. (p. 11)

In Enrique García Hernán’s book, Ignatius appears as a brilliant strategist capable of “conceiving the development of a global apostolate, as early as 1530, as the Roman Catholic Church’s answer to the fragmentation of the medieval ‘christianitas’”. He journeyed through the Europe of his time, then in full religious and political reconfiguration following the

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<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Antoine Fabre and Catherine Maire (ed.), *Les Antijésuites. Discours, figures et lieux de l’antijésuitisme à l’époque moderne*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010.

advances of the Protestant reformation. From Iñigo – his Basque name – to Ignatius – the Latinized version of his first name – and then Saint Ignatius, the author sets out to unravel the saint’s multiple intertwined relationships and thereby to re-establish the links between the different dimensions of the same protagonist: nobleman, soldier, pilgrim, founder of a religious order, spiritual father and a model for every Jesuit, herald of the Counter-Reformation, but also a heterodox and even heretic who was Basque, Spanish and Roman at the same time.

## Revisiting the youth of a future saint

One of the book’s successes lies in its detailed reconstruction of Ignatius’ youth. Jesuit hagiographers had focused on the period following their founding father’s conversion, which took place after he was seriously injured while defending the fortress of Pamplona against the French in 1521. This life-changing experience, after which he devoted himself to serving God, was interpreted as an *event* – in the sense of something that causes a rupture and creates a new order – in the interest of constructing memory, and the future founder’s education was thus overlooked. In contrast, Enrique García Hernán resituates the young Iñigo de Loyola as a family member and courtier living in a specific political, religious and spiritual environment in order to understand the figure of the future saint in his full historical dimension. Ignatius is no longer presented as the abstract model of a “universal Christian” but rather as a real man grappling with the problems of sixteenth-century Spain and Europe.

By taking this approach, the author reincorporates Ignatius of Loyola’s conversion into the religious and spiritual panorama of the time. He dwells at length on Iñigo’s close relationship with *alumbradismo* (“illuminism”). This spiritual trend, influenced by the northern European *Devotio Moderna* and then by Erasmus, favoured a direct relationship between the believer and God over mediation by ecclesiastical institutions. It thus sparked intense inquisitorial repression. Although the “historical problem” of “heterodox” influences on Ignatian spirituality still requires more thorough analysis,<sup>4</sup> the book has the merit of highlighting some historiographic problems with regard to the old Society of Jesus. One such example is the famous “Montmartre vow” taken in Paris in 1534 by Ignatius and his first seven companions. Whereas the first Jesuit historiography establishes it as the Order’s founding event, it is not known what was actually agreed between the first fathers: this episode, of which later accounts vary, is impossible to document<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> For further details, see Guido Mongini, *“Ad Christi similitudinem”. Ignazio di Loyola e i primi gesuiti tra eresia e ortodossia*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see Pierre Antoine Fabre’s article, “La Compagnie de Jésus et le souvenir du vœu de Montmartre (1534). État d’une recherche”, *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 24, 2004 [online: published online on 17 January 2009, consulted on 19 January 2017. URL : <http://ccrh.revues.org/2032> ; DOI : 10.4000/ccrh.2032

Finally, the book gains clarity and rigour in its French edition. Pierre Antoine Fabre offers not just a meticulous translation that makes this biography highly accessible to a non-specialist reader of the history of modern Spain. He also restores the author's original notation system and a number of passages that were omitted from the Spanish edition. In short, this version is enriched by new contributions, both by the author and the translator, which add to its quality.

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