

REVIEW ARTICLE: A slightly idiosyncratic review of book reviews of *Maximilian Hell (1720–92) and the Ends of Jesuit Science in Enlightenment Europe* (Brill, 2019. 478 pp.) <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004416833>

by Per Pippin Aspaas, Tromsø

In December 2019, the above book was published in open access on the webpages of Brill, an international academic book publisher. In January 2020, the first physical copies of the printed (hardback) version reached the two authors, László Kontler and myself. Two years later, what have we learnt about the reactions? In comments below, I have summarized the reactions of the various book reviewers, nine in total. While this exercise may well deserve criticism as an example of self-indulgent Narcissism (a defect in character which most of us Social Media users easily fall victim of), it is first and foremost conceived as an exercise in reflection. I find it fruitful to reflect, not only upon what a book brings to the world of academia, but also upon what a book review brings to its authors.

What was our book about? That depends on the eye of the beholder. Some will turn to it for information on the intrinsic development of astronomy and cognate disciplines during the latter half of the eighteenth century: Maximilian Hell was, after all, the Imperial and Royal Astronomer of the Habsburg Kingdom and the director of the Viennese University Observatory from 1755 to 1792 (see review #4, by Heilbron). Another obvious point of interest, given the tag “Jesuit Science” in the book’s title, is the Jesuit Father Hell as a piece in the puzzle of the centuries-long history of institutionalized Jesuit astronomy (#3, Udías). Others will dwell on his famous expedition to Vardø in far-northern Norway and turn to the book for information on the interactions between the Jesuit astronomer and various (Danish-)Norwegian practitioners of science during his visit (#8, Ellingsen). One sub-branch of Hell’s expedition programme, particularly intriguing to some, was the research undertaken by his travel companion János Sajnovics, who produced a *Demonstratio* of the linguistic kinship between Sami and Hungarian (#1, Vladár). The work of Sajnovics was used by Hell in his promotion of himself as an authoritative historian of the early history of the Magyars and (later) of himself as the champion of conservative, church-oriented patrons of science in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg kingdom (#2, Bodnár-Király). There is also some interest in Hell’s place in the cultural life of the capital: he was portrayed by famous artists as well as caricatured in anti-clerical satire (#6, Morrison; #7, Reeves). Finally, there is interest in the very notion of Enlightenment and the paradoxical participation of conservative Catholics, such as members of the Jesuit order, in the establishment process of empirically-based natural sciences rooted in Newtonian theory (#9, Fillafer; #5, Carstens).

One might add that Maximilian Hell was an eminent Neo-Latinist, i.e. a versatile speaker and writer of early-modern Latin, a circumstance which so far has not attracted any reviewers from the camp of scholars of Latinity. Our book is, however, listed among studies on eighteenth-century Latin in an annotated bibliography on “Neo-Latin: Literature” by William M. Barton, Clementina Marsico, Florian Schaffentrath, Lav Šubarić, and Isabella Walser-

Bürgler, published in *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies* (Brill, May 2021; pay-walled: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22224297-08101003>). According to this team of distinguished scholars, our book “deals with the intricate relationship between the Enlightenment, Catholicism, and administrative and academic reform in the Habsburg monarchy on the one hand, and the practices and ends of cultivating science in the Republic of Letters during the suppression of the Jesuits on the other. The point of reference [...] is the Jesuit and Viennese court astronomer Maximilian Hell, who played a crucial role in disseminating scientific knowledge at the time”. With this, it is time to have look at the various book reviewers’ readings.

- #1 *Zsuzsa C. Vladár* in *Magyar Nyelv* vol. 116, issue 1 (May 2020), pp. 96–102.¹ (in Hungarian, freely available online) <http://real.mtak.hu/id/eprint/108529>

My first reaction when receiving news about this review was: why on Earth haven’t I learnt Hungarian? What a treat it would have been to be able to grasp the breadth and depth of one of the leading experts on the early-modern roots of Finno-Ugrian linguistics! According to co-author László Kontler, however, this first ever review of our book is full of enthusiasm. I can add that Vladár’s description of our work is surely not only enthusiastic but also very thorough, with ample references ranging from a grammar published in 1610(!) to a paper by another Hungarian linguist that appeared in 2018. Being part of this four-centuries-long history can easily set one’s head spinning.

- #2a *Tibor Bodnár-Király* in *Sic itur ad astra* No. 72 (Dec 2020), pp. 271–79.² (in Hungarian; freely available online) <https://epa.oszk.hu/01000/01019/00045/pdf/>

With the title “Decentralizált Hell” (Hell Decentralized), this review is detailed and – like Vladár’s – it almost verges on a *Stand der Forschung* article. My depression for not being able to read it was, however, appeased by an abridged English version appearing a few months later.

¹ Zsuzsa Constantinovitsné Vladár is assistant professor in Finno-Ugrian linguistics at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, where she obtained her PhD in 2004 and habilitation in 2014. She has written more than a hundred academic pieces on the history of linguistics, several of which deal with eighteenth-century scholars who wrote in Latin on Hungarian and kindred languages. Hell’s travel companion, Sajnovics, is a figure that she has studied for several decades. Published ever since 1904, *Magyar Nyelv* (Hungarian Language) is the official journal of the Society of Hungarian Linguistics.

² Tibor Bodnár-Király is an intellectual historian and political scientist at Eötvös Lorand University in Budapest. His PhD thesis on the emergence of population statistics in Hungary at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (in Hungarian, 2018) has been followed by several scholarships and conference papers on the Central-European Enlightenment. *Sic itur ad astra* is a Hungarian journal for young historians, founded by students in 1987.

- #2b *Tibor Bodnár-Király* in *Austrian History Yearbook* vol. 52 (May 2021), pp. 15–16.³ (in English; pay-walled) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237821000278>

An emerging expert on the Austrian Enlightenment shares his reflections on the Hell of Aspaas & Kontler. Bodnár-Király perceives quite clearly – and describes sympathetically – the ambitions of our book: examining Hell as a Jesuit scholar in the socially entangled, transnational contexts of scientific activity during a constantly shifting, reform-riddled period of Enlightenment. His only point of criticism is that we seem to miss out on “the possible context of Hell’s position within Enlightenment Catholicism”, thereby giving “only a partial explanation of the Jesuit scholar’s conflicts with the functionaries of the statist and secular setting of the Austrian Enlightenment”. How I would have wished to be able to read the Hungarian text forming the basis of this review, in order to get a grip on this laconic remark! It is in any case interesting to note that, whereas Vladár finds our work extremely relevant for her research into the roots of Finno-Ugrian studies, her compatriot Bodnár-Király finds it equally pertinent to his own study of the social and intellectual history of the East Central European Enlightenment.

- #3 *Agustín Udías* in *Journal of Jesuit Studies* vol. 8, issue 1 (Dec 2020), pp. 111–13.⁴ (in English; open access) <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-0801P006-02>

It is with some degree of anxiety that one approaches the review by a leading scholar in the field of Jesuit historiography. Luckily, Udías proves himself to be extremely positive about the Hell that we have created. He gives a succinct summary of the book, which he praises as “essential for any study of the history of European astronomy and of Jesuit science”. *Essential*, nothing less. His only correction is that when we on p. 366 claim that only three Jesuit scholars were elected to the prestigious Royal Society of London during the eighteenth century, we have actually made a mistake. Udías can point to two more, bringing the total number to five. (Hell was not on the list in any case.) 478 pages with only one flaw... Can this really be the case? Apparently not.

³ *Austrian History Yearbook* is a major English-language journal devoted to all aspects of the history of the regions in which Hell and his associates lived and – save for a two-year excursion to the Far North – worked for his entire life. It is published by Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Emeritus professor at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (born 1935), himself a Jesuit and a geophysicist by training, Agustín Udías is a giant in the historiography of Jesuit science. His many, many publications in Spanish and English include standard works such as *Searching the Heavens and the Earth: The History of Jesuit Observatories* (2003) and the comprehensive *Jesuit Contribution to Science: A History* (2015). The *Journal of Jesuit Studies* is a fully open-access journal published by Brill and edited by scholars with a strong record in the study of Jesuit history, many of whom are affiliated with the vibrant Boston Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies.

- #4 *J. L. Heilbron* in *Church History* vol. 89, issue 4 (March 2021), pp. 953–55.⁵ (in English; pay-walled) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640721000408>

Three months after the words of a revered scholar in the middle of his 80s came the verdict of another seasoned giant – if not to say, a living legend. His reading of our book still puzzles me. Amazingly, despite the journal’s focus on church history – and our explicit effort at contributing to the contextualized history of *Jesuit Science* – Heilbron in his review restricts himself to a descriptive account of Hell as a scientist. While he acknowledges our study as “careful and valuable for historians of science”, he is displeased with our lack of comprehensive explanation of the various side-branches of Hell’s scientific activity. (Among other things, our protagonist presented theories on the disease of scurvy, on the aurora borealis, on electricity and magnetism, and we indeed point to these works in our book and contextualize them, although we devote far more space to Hell as an astronomer and Finno-Ugrian scholar.) As a whole, our book is permeated by an externalist, contextualizing line of inquiry. In place of context, Heilbron would have preferred to learn (far) more about the purely scientific aspects of Hell’s contributions to science. If anything, Heilbron’s take on Aspaas & Kontler’s Hell is an illustration of how this reputable scholar thinks history of science ought to be studied: scientific content should always be given priority over societal context. Luckily for us authors, not all reviewers agree.

- #5 *Simon Karstens* in *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* vol. 48, issue 1 (2021), pp. 196–98.⁶ (in German; pay-walled) <https://elibrary.duncker-humblot.com/journals/id/28/vol/48/iss/6162/art/61985/>

Like Bodnár-Király, this reviewer is an expert on the Austrian Enlightenment. He opens his summary of our work by characterizing it as “an important study into Catholic Enlightenment and the formation of early-modern natural sciences” (my translation). The overarching historiographical reflections in our introductory chapter are neatly identified: Karstens finds that “the authors identify four variants of the Enlightenment, in which Hell with varying degrees of intensity partook: first, the top-down enlightened reforms [of the Habsburg state]; second, the Catholic reform discourse, loyal to the church; third, the emancipatory, supra-territorial Enlightenment, critical of the church; and fourth, a Hungarian Enlightenment movement that first created its object – a Hungarian nation – through some

⁵ John Lewis Heilbron (born 1934) is professor emeritus of history at University of California, Berkeley. His magisterial works in the history of physics and astronomy are overwhelmingly voluminous. His defense of traditional, empirically-based investigations of the works of historical scientists against “post-modern”, theoretically-inclined, “externalist” methodology is well known. *Church History* is a quarterly journal covering all aspects of the history of Christianity and its cultural contexts, owned by the American Society of Church History and published by Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Simon Karstens is *Vertretungsprofessor* at Trier University in Germany, where he obtained his PhD in 2008 for a dissertation on the Austrian enlightened reformer Joseph von Sonnenfels (published in 2011) and his habilitation in 2019 based on research into earlier epochs of early-modern transnational history (see his book on Böhlau, 2021). Besides his monographs, Karstens has authored numerous articles on colonial, church, and state history. He is also impressively productive as a book reviewer. *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* is a quarterly journal published by the academic publishing house Duncker & Humblot in Berlin; its chronological emphasis is on history from the late Middle Ages until the Early Modern Period.

specific discourses". When reading through the review, I found made myself blushing ever so often, not least when Karstens in his last paragraph characterizes our book as "a successful, fascinating study" and hails it as "a model example (*Musterbeispiel*) demonstrating how fruitful it can be to take a closer look at historical characters that, as a result of the secularized narrative of progress, have been deemed irrelevant to the historical study of the emergence of modern science". Our monograph is thus placed squarely in the middle of a reorientation process in contemporary historiography, in which the European Enlightenment and its connections to religious ideologies and societal fraternities such as the Society of Jesus are seen in a new light. I feel enlightened!

- #6 *Heather Morrison* in *Central European History* vol. 52, issue 3 (Sep 2021), pp. 535–37.⁷ (in English; pay-walled) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938921001126>

This reading of our book starts by placing it on the same level as the recent masterpiece on Hell's contemporary, the Viennese botanist-and-explorer Nikolaus Joseph Jacquin (by Marianne Klemun and Helga Hühnel, 2017). Our externalist approach – which gives contextualization priority over scientific content – is sympathetically perceived and acknowledged. Morrison is not, however, entirely satisfied by our account of the controversies that Hell got himself entangled in; among other things, our story "documents but does not explain away why his contemporaries accused him of withholding or falsifying data". A lack of definitive answers is perhaps not the worst crime for a source-based historiography such as ours. It would have been far worse if this expert on the Austrian Enlightenment had found us guilty of providing more "definitive answers" than the source materials actually allow.

- #7 *Eileen Reeves* in *Isis* vol. 112, issue 3 (Sep 2021), pp. 607–9.⁸ (in English; pay-walled) <https://doi.org/10.1086/715687>

Being reviewed in a journal that is held in high esteem by all historians of science, and by an admired scholar at that, is an experience out-of-the-ordinary. According to Reeves, we have written a "splendid historical biography" in the form a "lively study" that includes, among other things, a "sustained and enlightening comparison of the Jesuits and their curious double, the Freemasons". The Masonic aspect of our story is in fact emphasized at some length in this brief but entertaining review. I particularly appreciate the way in which this

⁷ Heather Morrison is associate professor of history at New York State University and an expert on the Austrian Enlightenment and its transnational interconnections. Besides her PhD thesis on Joseph II and his reforms in the 1780s (Louisiana State Univ., 2005), she has produced a number of studies of especially Austrian colonial and Enlightenment history. Published by Cambridge University Press, *Central European History* is a well-established venue for articles and reviews on the history of the Habsburg lands and their surroundings in English.

⁸ Eileen Reeves is a professor of comparative literature at Princeton University. In her long list of academic books and articles since her PhD from Stanford in 1987, there are many that deal with Galileo and his age. To historians of astronomy, her contextualizing works on the interconnections between scientific activity and wider cultural phenomena (art, belles-lettres, journalism) in the early modern world are cherished eye-openers.

reviewer identifies a recurrent theme in our story of Hell's career – namely, his constant quest for authority as an expert not only in his core field of competence, astronomy, but in many more branches of knowledge production as well.

- #8 *Gunnar Ellingsen* in *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 18 (Nov 2021), pp. 221–22.⁹ (in Norwegian; open access) <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.5897>

There's a saying that no one is a prophet in his own land. The only Norwegian-language review so far is overall rather positive, even full of admiration for the "thorough[ness] and rich[ness]" of our analysis. Essentially, this Norwegian historian – or more precisely, this Norwegian historian of Norwegian science – raises two points of criticism. First, we ought to have analyzed Hell's activities during his Venus Transit Expedition more from a Dano-Norwegian angle: in particular, we should have written (far) more about the mutually influential interactions between Hell, bishop Gunnerus and the rest of the milieu around the Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters, which was founded in Trondheim in the early 1760s. Second, Ellingsen finds the language a bit difficult, with too long and complicated sentences that slow down reading and even makes the meaning hard to grasp in some cases. Regarding the first point, I fully agree – our chapters on Hell's famous expedition are too short. As for the second, Ellingsen is the only reviewer to have criticized our academic English, which – I may add – was weeded thoroughly by a professional proof-reader recommended by Brill. I do acknowledge, however, that academic traditions of style may differ between communities of historians in different countries.

- #9 *Franz L. Fillafer* in *Diciottesimo Secolo* vol. 6 (Nov 2021), pp. 217–19.¹⁰ (in English; open access) <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/ds/article/view/13067>

Back to the epicenter of Hell. Like Bodnár-Király and Karstens – and my co-author Kontler – Franz Fillafer is firmly rooted in Central-European scholarship on the intellectual, political, cultural, and ideological repercussions of the European Enlightenment as it played out in and around the Habsburg capital Vienna. The opening paragraphs of Fillafer's review sets the tone: "In this superb and trailblazing book", we allegedly "masterfully recover the significance of the Jesuits' vast Austrian province as a key site for the circulation of knowledge". Moreover, our "study is also an extremely rewarding read when it comes to the history of scientific voyages of exploration in the eighteenth century and their clerical

⁹ Gunnar Ellingsen (born 1974) is director of the Norwegian Fisheries Museum in western Norway. Since his PhD thesis on the history of Norwegian meteorology and oceanography (Bergen, 2013), he has published several works on the history of Norwegian science, including at least one article investigating topics from the eighteenth century. *1700-tal* is owned by the national societies for eighteenth-century studies in the various Nordic countries; published by Septentrio Academic Publishing, it is a fully open access journal. I am myself a co-editor of the peer-reviewed articles section in *1700-tal*, but not a member of its team of review editors.

¹⁰ Franz Leander Fillafer (born 1982) is a historian at the Academy of Sciences in Vienna. He has written extensively on global historiography, intellectual history, and above all the history of the Central-European Enlightenment; his works include a new monograph on the Habsburg Enlightenment, which looks set to become a classic reference work for decades to come (in German, 2020). *Diciottesimo Secolo* is the official yearbook of the Italian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, published in open access by Firenze [Florence] University Press.

ingredient”. And so it continues. The reviewer rephrases and reiterates the main findings of all parts of our book and obviously has had a good time reading it. His only point of criticism is a mild one. “To my mind”, he states, “the authors may even be too timid”, when trying to summarize the value of our case study for the wider understanding of the Enlightenment in a late eighteenth-century setting. Having achieved more than we ever dreamt of ourselves is at least better than the opposite, which seems to be the case for many of Hell’s own efforts in the domain of empirically based, theoretically inclined knowledge production.

A little addendum

I should like to thank every single one of the reviewers for having read – and shared with the contemporary community of scholars – their views on the lengthy book that László Kontler and myself have written. To those that haven’t (yet) written an academic book, I can assure you that the experience of receiving such “post-publication open peer-review” is highly recommended. Finally, in case there are any readers left at the very end of this overview of other people’s views, here is a short description of myself and my co-author, culled from John L. Heilbron’s review (#4 above):

“László [i.e., László] *Kontler* is professor of history at the Central European University in Budapest/Vienna. His expertise in Habsburg intellectual and cultural history informs a discussion in the present book of the enlightened government of Emperor Joseph II and the agitation caused by Hell and Sajnovics’s theory, developed during their stay at Vardø, that Hungarians and Lapps spoke a similar language.”

“Per Pippin Aspass [*Aspaas*] is senior academic librarian at [UiT] the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø [...]. [He] is a classical philologist with a command of neo-Latin, a specialism unfortunately not widely enough distributed among historians of early modern science. For a decade or so he has been studying Hell’s career, especially Hell’s adventures in Vardø and new theory of the aurora, the texts of which he has published elsewhere.”



(László’s self-portrait from Jan 2020, moments after he had become the proud recipient of his first hard copy)



(Erik Lieungh’s photo of Pippin from Jan 2020)

