

**The Truth Behind the Popish Plot of 1678**

**A Research Paper**

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## Introduction

During the seventeenth century, the political situation in England evidenced by her turbulent foreign policy; the growing fears of Catholicism; James II's conversion to Catholicism; the events of the Great Fire as well as Sir Edmund Godfrey's murder contributed significantly to and essentially began what has been known in history as the Popish Plot. These events would not cause the Popish Plot as a matter of cause or effect, but would be used to further the goals of those that wished to see James excluded from the throne. It is difficult to assess the intentions of those that wished to interfere with James' succession, yet it seems that most of the exclusionists were sincere in their fear of Catholicism, and especially the Jesuits. This fear had been embedded in English history since the time of the Reformation. From the mindset of the Protestants, events such as the Gunpower Plot and the Great Rebellion were signs of the 'design' that the papacy had on all of Protestantism. By 1670, any action that even appeared to be negative was automatically attributed to the Catholics. The policies of Charles inflamed this growing tension. With the circulation of various propaganda, and the growing tension between Parliament and the Crown, society had fallen into a form of mass hysteria, which has occurred any number of times throughout history.

The fact that an assortment of nebulous ideas came together and formed such a powerful movement within society was in of itself astonishing. In order to demonstrate how this could occur, a high priority had to be placed both on Charles' foreign policies, and on the issue of anti-Catholicism. These two factors, with the testimonies of Titus Oates and Israel Tonge, proved believable to English society that there could be a Catholic plot in store for England. With society in such upheaval, Charles' rivals attempted to exclude James from the throne. Therefore, it is necessary to examine Charles' foreign policies from his restoration until 1679, and to explore the various characters, such as Sir Edmund Godfrey, whose murder seemed to society to prove the existence of a plot. The infancy stages of the plot, between August 1678-February 1679, will be explored and explained in light of the aforementioned factors. Society's fears of absolutism and arbitrary government would also help 'prove' the existence of a plot. Finally, the testimonies of Oates and Tonge will be examined in light of Charles' foreign policies and England's anti-Catholicism.

Titus Oates' testimony was accepted mainly because it focused on both arbitrary government and religion, and both of these issues were of concern to society. With a king tottering on the edge of Catholicism; his favoring of Catholic nations; his avoidance of Parliament; and in his desire to

promulgate seemingly Catholic documents, the masses were right to fear a popish ruler. With James II next in the line of succession, and with Charles' tendency toward Catholicism, the fear of Catholicism grew to an even greater extent. It is evident that the idea of a plot was a mere fabrication, yet with James the next in line to the throne, a solution had to be found to eliminate this threat. It seems evident that the Popish Plot was intended to do just that.

"Popery is such a thing as cannot, but for want of a word to express it, be called a religion; for is it to be mentioned with that civility which is otherwise decent to be used in speaking about the differences of human opinion about divine matters. I despise such a religion. A piece of wafer, broken betwixt a priest's finger to be our savior! And what becomes of it when eaten, and taken down, you know."<sup>1</sup>

In the seventeenth century, the notion of anti-popery was the most prevalent attitude of English Society. However, some of these fears and attitudes grew more out of ignorance than fact. It seems that some believed that English Catholics did obstruct the functioning of English society; they did not want to conform, and they appeared, at least by rumor, divergent from the rest of society. The French persecutions, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, clearly demonstrated the aims and intentions of Catholicism. The notion of absolutism envisioned a group of ministers freed from society's general will now unleashing ruin upon this Protestant nation. Through these mandates, these ministers could then change the system and subvert Protestant ideals. To carry this out to its fullest, all institutions blocking this action had to be destroyed including any laws or constitutions. These ideas originated during the Cabal ministry (1667-73) and persisted throughout the Popish Plot (1678). Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury would continue equating absolutism and popery. This Whig propaganda would, in fact, cause much fear

including that of civil war, which then would diminish some of the conspiracy revolving around the Popish Plot.<sup>2</sup>

The Rump Parliament had decided on February, 1649 that the monarchy was unwilling to provide for the best interests of the state or her people, therefore should be abolished. This action left England without a monarch and Charles II throneless. He would spend the next eleven years wandering throughout Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> By 1660, Charles was asked to return to his homeland. The Long Parliament was abolished; an annual excise grant of 100,000 pounds on tea, cider, and beer was provided for the Crown; the army was significantly compensated; the Act of Indemnity acquitted all those involved in Charles I's death; all land (in theory) was returned to its rightful owner, thus the government was preparing for the return of their monarch. The Cavalier Parliament was to last for eighteen years before it was abolished in 1678.<sup>4</sup>

By his actions Charles frightened both society and Parliament. He seemed to have been rather embittered, easily slipping into emotional rages. His followers often sought after his affirmation, which not only did not lead to the best interests of the state, but ultimately found Charles changing ministers quite often.<sup>5</sup> D. L. Farmer in his work Britain and the Stuarts describes Charles as a pleasure-loving sensuous person lacking any real sense of the functioning of the British government. This was due

largely to the fact that he had been away from England for quite some time. This would automatically question his ability to undertake the various challenges during his reign. He did believe in and admired the absolutism of Louis XIV; had a unique interest in the glamour and glitter of the Roman Catholic Church; and knew that he was never to leave his throne again for Western Europe. These issues would in time frustrate and anger his subjects, but for the time being all were happy with the return of Charles. Indeed, his preoccupation with absolutism and the Catholic Church would eventually bring much stress and near disaster to his country.<sup>6</sup>

It was evident that England was against Catholicism in any form, and the very mentioning of the word produced the most bizarre effects. Charles was consistently suspected of being a Catholic, even though his attendance at Anglican services was impeccable. Charles, in the opinion of many, held beliefs contrary to the desires of the multitudes, and their fears were made manifest in Charles' leniency in his enforcement of the Penal Laws, and in the favoritism he had shown the Catholic courtiers. For these reasons many suspected him as a 'church papist'. When Charles in 1663 tried to free individuals from the claws of the Penal Laws, this action was seen as 'earth-shaking'.<sup>7</sup> The Penal Laws were a body of legislation passed by Parliament in order to provide disciplinary action to recusancy as well as any

other form of Catholic worship or practice. These laws were enacted between the years 1559-1610, and were not enforced for long periods of time. They were recalled during the Gunpowder Plot of 1606, and were not enforced again until 1673, and in the years following the ordeal of the Popish Plot. The Test Acts of 1673 and 1678 barred all Catholics from public office if they would not submit to the Anglican Rite. The goal of the Penal Laws were to persuade dissenters to the Anglican Church, that is, to nullify their contradictory position, and to allow for one universal state religion within a centralized state. Of course, the centralization of power would be focused on the monarchy. During times of crisis, the government tried to enforce these laws, but usually to no avail. This was due to the fact that the actual number of Roman Catholics in England remained a mystery. This mystery and the assumption that Catholics were to be feared contributed to the feeling that this group posed a considerable threat to the state.<sup>8</sup>

As the feelings for Catholicism continued to be strained throughout English society, so was it the same for Catholic doctrine. The issue of transubstantiation would form the corpus of the first Test Act of 1673, which not only separated the Catholics from the Protestants, but continued to evidence the fact that the typical Anglican found many issues of Catholicism insane.<sup>9</sup> Charles' insistence on issuing the Declaration of Indulgence, which



granted religious toleration to Catholics, and the English wars against the Dutch were seen as Catholic conspiracies. Since England fought on the side of the French, the masses found the use of French power to be abhorrent. From Charles' perspective, the Dutch were England's trading rivals, hence their natural enemy.<sup>10</sup> Catholic France and her form of government, which was ultimately based on absolutism, was despised by all of English society. Absolutism and Catholicism were so quickly identified as one in the same, their public reaction became inseparable as well. Louis XIV was definitely a Catholic monarch, and Charles was indeed beginning to bargain with the French for various support. His association with this Catholic monarch, and his favoring of the Catholics in his own country would frustrate his Anglican rivals. This issue would explode very soon.<sup>11</sup>

At this time, English society was frantically fearful of a Catholic plot that would seize control of their dominions. William Prynne, a young lawyer, reworked both the Habernfeld Plot and the Civil War into his own account of the present. This idea was circulated by Prynne in his works The Popish Royal Favorite (1643) and A True and Perfect Narrative (1659). These ideas would provide the groundwork for the upcoming event known as the Popish Plot.<sup>12</sup>

Both the Habernfeld Plot and Prynne's works would once again surface during the Popish Plot, therefore it is necessary to summarize their major ideas. Namely, the

papists, especially the Jesuits, brought about the Civil War and the death of Charles I in an attempt to make Cromwell king, and this same group was responsible for the uprising in Ireland. They were to cause the Scots to rebel, and Ireland would once again revolt backed by French military aid and Jesuit financial assistance. The English were to experience a two-fold glory. Firstly, her king was to be separated from her people due to threats of absolutism and popery, and then there would be a plot against the life of the king. The king's death would find many Catholics killing many Protestants, and a Catholic king would then find his way to the throne.<sup>13</sup>

The question remains as to how such a ridiculous group of ideas became so widespread that a Popish Plot could become possible. The answer to this lies in England's gradual but steady growth toward an anti-Catholic tradition. Two issues must be addressed regarding the notion of Catholicism itself as viewed by the English Protestants. The papists, according to Protestants since the Reformation, were seen as obedient slaves under the authority of the pope whose greatest goal was to see the end to Protestantism no matter what the cost. The 'myth of the blood thirsty papist' would again gain much ground especially in view of Louis XIV's great ascendancy and his favoritism for the Roman Catholic Church. When the Duke of York, Charles' brother and heir to the throne, converted to Catholicism (1669), this

provided for a continued fear that England was heading in the same direction as Catholic France. English history dictated that this could be a very painful and bloody situation. The Marian persecutions of the sixteenth century proved that the Catholics had no trouble in eliminating their Protestant rivals, for Mary had sent many to the stake. After Mary's reign, her successor, Elizabeth, pursued Protestantism as the state religion and was not sympathetic at all toward the Catholics during her reign, thus she was eventually excommunicated. Elizabeth's excommunication and the papal blessings over the invasions of Ireland proved that Catholicism and popery were identified with hostility and persecution. Charles I's government, with the advent of William Laud, brought a growing tension between the Crown and Parliament, for they believed that Charles was actually creating an English government based on popery and absolutism, yet at the same time society still feared the papists and their treasonous activities. The factions in Parliament continued to circulate propaganda, both in public and within their ranks, that Charles was up to no good regarding the Catholic question.<sup>14</sup>

By the time of Charles II's reign, anti-popery and absolutism were not only feared but hated, and Charles seemed to inflame this hatred by his policies heightening the religious toleration problem. This arose in part due to his faulty and cumbersome foreign policy. Since this fear

was present, and it has been argued that both Charles I and II courted and pursued Catholic policies, this demonstrates the fact that the plot itself arose beside their policies. The conclusion remains that the plot surfaced due to Charles II's dealing in foreign policy, and especially with the French.<sup>15</sup>

The events of these various ministries, and their 'half-baked' foreign policies invariably led to the Popish Plot. Without these events in the area of foreign policy, then most of the 'proof' regarding the plot would have evaporated. This does not mean that there was not an adequate anti-Catholic feeling, but that their policies fed directly into society's fears of popish conspiracies. It is evident that the political disposition of the country was in poor shape. Politically, these situations could be divided into two main policies adopted and pursued by Charles. The first period began at Charles' restoration and ended with the secret Treaty of Dover (1670). After 1670, the Treaty of Dover, the conversion of James to Catholicism, and a whole series of decisions in foreign policy would focus all the attention on excluding James from the throne.<sup>16</sup> Also, between 1660-70, Charles tried to work with and through Parliament; however, by 1670 the king realized that Parliament was not going to compromise with him. Therefore, we have two periods of time that must be addressed regarding the political situation; the more hostile period beginning

in 1670.<sup>17</sup>

From Charles' reign beginning in 1660, and up until the emergence of the plot, he would have had three different governments. The ministries of Clarendon (1660-67), the Cabal (1667-73), and that of Danby (1674-79) all failed miserably prompting contempt both from society and Parliament. Therefore it is necessary to examine each of these governments, emphasizing their major flaws.<sup>18</sup> John Kenyon in his work The Popish Plot indicates that the accumulation of various events in foreign policy accounted for the explosion of a feeling of anti-Catholicism. Basically, the Catholics were responsible for any grievance in society. Evidence supporting this statement will be forthcoming in the following paragraphs.<sup>19</sup>

Charles, after his restoration, reappointed Sir Edward Hyde as Lord Chancellor, a position he held since 1658. Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon, realized that he had to receive from Parliament an adequate income for the Crown as well as to provide the groundwork for a workable relationship to emerge between the Crown and parliament. Clarendon blundered badly over the issue of government finance. Taxes were high, and the Crown was not gaining solvency. The debt in 1651 to the Crown would be an estimated one million pounds. The Royalists' cries went unanswered; the Crown's dependency on Parliament increased, and commercially, the English were in a definite bind. If this issue was not resolved, then the

Crown would have to attempt to find sources of revenue other than Parliament. This was in fact what Charles had done. He simply dissolved Parliament in December, 1660.<sup>20</sup> To gain revenue, he sold Dunkirk to France, and in 1662 married the Portugese princess Catherine of Braganza for a handsome dowry. Both of these issues would infuriate Parliament, for these dealings were with Catholic powers, thus, in their minds should not have been done.<sup>21</sup> The most financially depleting event was that of the Second Dutch War (1664). The English supposedly fought this war over economic reasons, namely trade. The English fought especially bad during the course of this war. The war left the treasury depleted, and Parliament did not seem in any rush in appropriating more cash. With Charles unable to repair his damaged naval equipment, the Dutch won a decisive victory at Medway; this all proved to be a calamity greater than expected by the Crown. Clarendon was blamed for the war disasters. Also, the Great Fire of 1666 and the plague the year before did not help Charles' situation. Between the plague, the Great Fire, and the English humiliation at Medway, this proved the end of Clarendon.<sup>22</sup> Whatever else can be stated about Clarendon, he definitely began the masses fearing his popish policies. This fear would eventually lead a group of men to try to procure the Exclusion Bill thereby eliminating the proper succession of James to the throne. As Hilaire Belloc states:

"the feeling of the street was violently excited against Clarendon; and had he

not yielded to it, it may have become an arm for use against the monarchy by that faction of wealthy men which was already becoming dangerous."<sup>23</sup>

The Cabal, which immediately followed Clarendon's banishment, performed no better than the previous ministry. Their ministry was fragmented and ineffective, which was evidenced by their persistence in a foreign policy that had failed for Clarendon. Namely, they pursued religious toleration, renewed hostility toward the Dutch, and a concern for the economy, including trade. This 'new' ministry would, as did Clarendon's, continue to irritate Parliament. This irritation was caused in part by Charles' desire to appoint non-Anglican members to his cabinet of advisors. The fact that two of his ministers were Catholic automatically concerned Parliament. The question now became: What popish activity would this new ministry become involved with?<sup>24</sup>

The growing power of Catholic France always remained a threat to England. France's aggression, in attempting to confiscate the Spanish Netherlands, concerned both Sweden and England. This gain in territory was due to the fact that Louis had been in the midst of war with Spain on Holland's behalf. However, Holland would not consent to the growth of French power, and quickly with the help of England, pursued a quick end to the war. This tension beginning in 1667 was quickly ended by an alliance. The Triple Alliance was signed in 1668, against France, between Holland, Sweden, and Great

Britian. Its success was immediate, hence leaving Charles well contented.<sup>25</sup> Politically, however, this alliance was disastrous. For Sweden only parted somewhat from her traditional friendship with France, and the Anglo-Dutch treaty still provided tension between the two countries. If Charles was searching for a stable foreign policy, this was definitely not a step in the right direction. The most significant development was Charles' realization that supplies and money could not be depended upon Parliament, for they simply did not provide in the past. This issue came to the forefront when the Admiralty was attacked; Charles asked for supplies, and all he got from Parliament was a verbal statement assessing the situation. Charles could no longer accept such military defeats especially in the navy. His defeats at Medway, and other humiliating defeats at the hands of the Dutch, could have been avoided if Parliament had provided the necessary funds. Charles had to do something drastic. The Triple Alliance was to be abandoned in return for an alliance with the French against the Dutch. It is significant to note Charles' helplessness; his irritation with Parliament, which prompted him to negotiate the Treaty of Dover.<sup>26</sup> Later, this treaty would definitely add much fuel to the fire regarding Charles' Catholicism. This was the beginning of the secret Treaties of Dover. The Treaty provided for the following: Charles had to declare war against the Dutch; Louis was to compensate the Crown



with 200,000 pounds during the course of the war; England was to provide warships; and furthermore, Charles had agreed to pronounce himself Catholic at an appropriate time, and if he needed troops, the French were willing to provide the necessary manpower. A fake treaty was made up and signed publicly in order to fool Parliament. Parliament was fooled; they voted him an additional 800,000 pounds, and in March, 1672 the English yet waged another war against the Dutch. This Third Dutch War remained extremely unpopular amongst the populace. Later, Charles had again reiterated his Declaration of Indulgence, and it was not long before his enemies began to link this war against the Dutch with this second Declaration of Indulgence.<sup>27</sup> The Dutch War had continued to drag on and by 1673 Parliament had little patience. Parliament had begun to think of the Dutch War as another Catholic conspiracy too, hence the fight between Parliament and the Crown began in 1671 when Charles was presented with a petition barring the growth of popery. Two years later, the king, in exchange for financial support, was to renounce his Declaration of Indulgence and was forced to assent to the Test Act. The economic question ranked second only to religion. The Declaration of Indulgence and the Duke of York's open conversion to Catholicism began this mounting tension. The Cavalier Parliament threatened to stop all financial aid including supplies, if the Dutch War was not stopped immediately. In 1674, Charles surrendered to the

Dutch, and the English were out of the war. It is obvious that religious conflicts brought an end to the Third Dutch War, yet the scars of this event brought the Cabal ministry to a staggering defeat too.<sup>28</sup>

Some have argued that Parliament's concern over Charles' Catholic promises were greatly exaggerated. Charles did manage to squeeze needed money out of the French, and the trade questions were definitely an issue. In the end, however, the tension over religion prevailed.<sup>29</sup>

In history, it is necessary that fact rank over fiction. If we are to accept this premise, then the facts definitely have proven Charles' shortcomings. The Third Dutch War provided nothing that the Crown had hoped to receive. If converting England to Catholicism was his goal; he secured absolutely nothing.<sup>30</sup> Charles' authenticity regarding Catholicism was questioned also, for he did not convert until near death. His policies, even though sympathetic to Catholicism were in many cases his only political option as demonstrated by his entrance into the secret Treaty of Dover.<sup>31</sup> He had been forced to accept the Test Act (1673), and he had to denounce his own Declaration of Indulgence. By the Test Act not only were non-Catholics barred from office, but a real opposition party began to emerge in Parliament under the names of the Whigs and Country Party. Charles favored Louis' absolutism, yet he could not even get his Declaration of Indulgence passed. The

Catholic question would indeed get more 'hot' before it would be resolved a few years later.<sup>32</sup>

With the fall of the Cabal in 1673, Charles was forced to concentrate mainly on pacifying Parliament in order to gain the necessary funds to pay for the Dutch Wars. This same year found Sir Thomas Osborne as the Lord Treasurer, and for all practical purposes, was the man behind the Crown until his fall in 1679. By 1674, Osborne would become the Earl of Danby; the king's chief advisor.<sup>33</sup> Danby was very talented in trying to court the Commons in any way that he could. If this entailed bribery or patronage, then it just had to be done. The only loophole was keeping Parliament from learning of his dangerous game. He knew that with a disgruntled Parliament no money would be forthcoming to fund Charles' wars. He tried to base his politics on a basic anti-French position grounded heavily in the religious ideas of the Anglican Church, this policy would serve to appease the gentry class too. This policy was to help negate rumors of Charles' dealings with France.<sup>34</sup> By this time Lord Shaftesbury was leading an opposition party against the Crown. This was to remain Danby's greatest obstacle. Danby set out to ally himself with the Dutch against the French. This move won him much support from Parliament, hence Parliament, when it was not disbanded, appropriated funds for this supposed war against France. Charles during this time period made several deals with Louis himself. He agreed

to neutrality in exchange for a French subsidy. The Crown invariably was receiving funds from Parliament to fund its war against France, and from France in exchange for neutrality. Danby was in a rather precarious situation, for if Parliament was to become aware of his policy, his political career would be destroyed. Parliament was in fact becoming anxious as to when this war was to begin; there was far too much stalling, yet the Crown was satisfied with its income from two sources. Danby's chances of ever redeeming this situation were crushed when Parliament, through the French ambassador, Montagu, received letters signed by Danby and initialed by Charles asking for a continuance of the French subsidy in exchange for neutrality. Parliament was engulfed with anger; they had been duped, and Danby was quickly impeached and sent to the tower.<sup>35</sup>

Foreign policy had definitely been a nightmare during these years. The great deal of correspondence between Catholic France and Protestant England drove a wedge between Charles and Parliament. The Duke of York and his entourage constantly attracted negative publicity. Charles' dealings at Dover would definitely plague his remaining days in office, for once his opposition would get a hold of it, especially Shaftesbury, the lid would blow right off the top. The masses, as well as Parliament, with the evidence of Clarendon's, the Cabal's, and Danby's activities, were all fearing this Popish Plot. This 'grand design' and all of its

wild proposals, in view of Charles entangled political affairs, could be construed, and in fact had, that is, in 1679.<sup>36</sup>

This 'grand design' was to be fulfilled in the line of succession to the throne itself. The king's younger brother, James Stuart was the apparent heir, and was known to be Catholic. James' conversion to Catholicism in 1669 caused much grief to those already preoccupied with Charles' Catholic policies. They knew with James that Protestant policies would definitely suffer, and that the Catholics policy would be favored. As rumor had went, the Jesuits had attempted to spread Catholicism by corrupting crowned heads, and James had fallen victim.<sup>37</sup> James added a political twist regarding religion according to John Miller in his work Popery and Politics in England 1660-1688. The Whig party coodled the resentment and embitterment towards the Catholics, and provided fuel to the fire in attempting to exclude James from the throne. The king, fearing this action, would back down and at times would enforce the Penal Laws. His cancellation of the Declaration of Indulgence was simply to promote that fact. Charles refused to let the Whigs determine the succession, and hoped by appeasing the multitudes they would quiet down. Hence, James Stuart was definitely a cause in some of the crowd's concern, for he was the popish king.<sup>38</sup>

The succession of James II to the throne of England,

and the rise of anti-Catholic concerns, can ultimately be traced back to two distinct and powerful reasons. First of all, the policies set forth by France, and England's entanglement within them, had caused much fear throughout society; secondly, the heir to the throne had confessed publicly to be Catholic. These issues were circulated throughout society in a document published by Andrew Marvell entitled The Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government (1678).<sup>39</sup> These issues culminated into what was known as the Exclusion Crisis, which attempted to prevent James from attaining the throne. The Bill stated that:

"the Duke of York had been seduced by the Pope's agents to enter the Church of Rome, and had advanced the power of the French king to the hazard of these kingdoms. On the demise of the country, the crown should devolve on the next in succession, as if the Duke were dead."<sup>40</sup>

The Exclusion Crisis led by Shaftesbury and John Pym would eventually fail. Even with the Popish Plot, the exclusionists could not get their bill passed in Parliament, hence in the end their reverence for both "divine right and hereditary succession triumphed over their emotional fear of popery."<sup>41</sup>

The idea of a Popish Plot was not new or original, yet it needed a source to bring it to life. This source was found in the person of Titus Oates.<sup>42</sup> He was no scholar; yet he possessed an amount of cleverness and trickery, and with

this he launched the plot. The plot was developed and spread by both Israel Tonge and Titus Oates. Tonge claimed that the Jesuits were responsible for the Great Fire, the Rebellion and the execution of Charles I, hence his ideas related closely to Prynne's. He then disappeared for a while and wrote a work on the existence of a Popish Plot. In 1675, with a completed account of a Plot, he met up with Titus Oates. Even though the work had been completed, it still had to be presented to the Crown. Titus Oates, in the meantime, had joined the Society of Jesus; he later claimed that his conversion was insincere. Even later, he stated that he joined this order to extract information from them that he could use against them. Tonge was obviously interested in this material. John Kenyon, a noted historian, goes out of his way as presenting Oates as simply obnoxious. His sexual tastes were questionable, his looks hideous, and his mannerisms barbaric.<sup>43</sup> In 1677, Oates was stationed at Saint Omer, and this is where he gathered his information. Oates returned to England in 1678, and then with Tonge wrote an indictment consisting of forty-three articles. These two men compared their ideas and conjured up an untimely fate for many of the accused. To summarize, the forty-three articles maintained that the principle interest of the Jesuits in England was to overthrow both king and government, and the financial support was to come from the Spanish Jesuits and the French king's confessor, Pere de la Chaise. "Two Jesuits

had been paid to shoot the king, four Irish ruffians to stab him, and Sir George Wakeman, the queen's physician, to poison him."<sup>44</sup> Some wild accusations even brought the queen under suspicion. This notion seemed absurd to all those that knew Charles' wife.<sup>45</sup> The claims that Oates had prepared were being questioned by the king, and even the Privy Council was quite skeptical in believing the existence of a plot at this time. Many believed that if such a plot existed, the evidence should have been more tangible. Yet, the Jesuits were mentioned, and any hint of the Jesuits always produced a considerable hate. Also, the Plot was in the tradition of other English Protestant conspiracies, for anti-popish plots were all too familiar to the English people. The only thing that could surpass the Englishmen's hate of the Jesuits would be their ignorance of them.<sup>46</sup>

A new figure would enter the scene; this was Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey. He was one of the best known and well-respected magistrates in London. He was a known Protestant, yet he was tolerant of others, including papists. He was a friend of Edward Coleman, the Duchess of York's secretary, yet maintained a sense of mysteriousness about himself that constantly threatened authority. In September, 1678, Oates and Tonge went to him so that he could take their depositions on oath regarding the supposed Plot. He refused unless he could see the content of the papers that they included in their statements. Godfrey,



later reviewing these papers became quite disturbed, and warned Coleman that he was incriminated in various documents. But Coleman, not taking the hint, did not destroy these rather ambiguous documents. This action would prove to be his downfall. Danby, the king's chief minister, was becoming rather beside himself, for he wanted more incriminating evidence, yet he was not receiving it.<sup>47</sup> Hence, Danby suggested that the Jesuits' mail be intercepted at the post office, but Oates had a better idea. Oates and Tonge wrote five incriminating letters to Thomas Bedingfield, the Duke of York's Jesuit confessor, and then sent them to Windsor. Bedingfield received these letters, and they were so incriminating that he showed them directly to James. James was sure these letters were forgeries, which only heightened his desire to find a solution to this growing problem. The resounding conclusion was that whatever the end result would be, it would not be to the benefit of the Catholics.<sup>48</sup> It must be stressed that these letters were known to be forgeries, nevertheless they still aggravated the concern over Catholicism and popery. Nonetheless, Tonge was summoned and was asked to account for these letters, and of course he placed the responsibility upon Oates. He had to appear before a special committee appointed to examine this matter. Before the council, Oates had sworn that five letters were authentic and written by Nicholas Blundell, Doctor Fogarty, Thomas White, and William Ireland. This

testimony was evidence enough to arrest and later convict these men of high treason. Also, during this session, Oates had testified that Coleman was conspiring against the Crown. Coleman, a convert to Catholicism, in 1674 wrote a few letters overseas inquiring about England's general status regarding Catholicism. Historians agree that no plot was ever implied in Coleman's letters, yet Oates would not recant his testimony. Coleman would be found guilty of treason and executed.<sup>49</sup> The evidence presented at these trials was at best circumstantial. There were no witnesses, therefore many would be convicted of crimes that they had never committed.<sup>50</sup>

Since it has been stated that many found the Plot absurd, then what could have caused its acceptance? It seems that the murder of Godfrey, or more alarming, his murder, caused the Protestants to fear for their own lives. The masses definitely used his death to the maximum, for by January, 1679 daggers bearing his name were sold in the marketplace. This being a reasonable assurance that his death raised even more suspicion amongst the commonfolks. The death of Godfrey had become a rallying point by which the commonfolk could now 'prove' the existence of a plot.<sup>51</sup>

The mystery of Godfrey's death and the plot will continue to be questioned, for the mystery of the plot is bound up in the mystery of Godfrey's death. The term mystery certainly must be accentuated, for there are several in the

plot itself. Since the evidence regarding Godfrey's death was scant, and medical techniques were lacking, many theories have surfaced attempting to explain his mysterious death.<sup>52</sup> These theories have ranged from suicide to murder. Also, many suspects have been raised including his two brothers, Michael and Benjamin; the Jesuits-on account of a dangerous secret exchanged between the priests and Coleman; the Earl of Danby; the friend's of Edward Coleman; the questionable Titus Oates, and many others. The list seems endless, and the evidence remains scant.<sup>53</sup>

Many theories have surfaced regarding Godfrey's relations with Edward Coleman. Specifically, why did Godfrey become so upset when presented with Oates' 'documents'? Also, after Godfrey had seen these documents, and their implications, it remains a mystery whether he let Coleman know their contents or not. If he did let Coleman know, then why did not Coleman destroy these letters that would later find him condemned? The fact that these letters were not destroyed, and that these documents would cause Coleman's execution creates a doubt to arise regarding what actions Godfrey pursued after he received the accusations. These questions will never be known, and insofar as this is true, the Plot will always contain an amount of mystery. Unfortunately, the popular theory was that Godfrey's death was the work of the evil papists, and not surprisingly, the Jesuits. This event blew the whole affair sky high, for now

a popular magistrate died at the hands of those evil papists. No one ever considered that maybe Oates himself killed Godfrey knowing well that the event would provide the necessary fuel for his contemporaries.<sup>54</sup> Between the murder of Godfrey and the discovery of the treasonable material of Edward Coleman, Charles had to allow for some solution. While attempting to squash the Exclusion Crisis, some sacrifices had to be made. Coleman had lost his life, and many other Jesuits found familiar fates. His 'solution' relieved at least some of the fears in Parliament and society.<sup>55</sup>

I have up to this point examined the various elements that led up to the Popish Plot. It must be remembered that society had been well-prepared for this ordeal, and welcomed it. Various events such as the Great Fire and the murder of Godfrey kept the 'ball-rolling'. It must also be remembered that the political parties greatly increased the unpopularity of Charles' policies.

Charles' position in this whole affair was extremely precarious, and at times, his actions were brought forth simply out of fear of circumstances. He dwelled at length trying to embellish his reign by attempting to decorate his policies with anti-Catholic fervor, yet his policies lacked the necessary ingredients to make this a reality. His policies were made under pressure, hence he frequently appeared 'behind the eight ball' during his reign. For

example, in November 1678 he issued an edict that all laws should be enforced against the papists. Also, Charles promulgated the second version of the Test Act, which prohibited all Catholics from Parliament.<sup>56</sup>

One of the main goals of the Plot was to exclude James from the throne, and the Whigs seemed to foster the anti-Catholic idea to further the cause. Arbitrary government and a Catholic king became identical terms, and asserted that the exclusion of James was the only solution to the problem. After the Whigs failed in attempting to win Parliament, mainly since Charles was to decide when it was to meet, they appealed to the masses. The use of pressure was not a bad idea, for it caused Charles to renounce his Declaration of Indulgence in 1662 and again in 1672. The war against the Dutch ended in 1674, and to no surprise, in 1678 was declared on France. This group could flex their muscles. The situation was redeemed by Charles, for he was vigilant in guaranteeing the right of James to attain the throne. Our witness is history, for James II did gain the throne.<sup>57</sup>

The Plot was indeed a farce. One source states that the Plot did have its birth within a society that was ready, and it found its origin in a few men.<sup>58</sup> John Kenyon does feel that the Plot did arise out of an apparent flaw in society at that given time. The conditions were right and the right people were there at the proper time. B.S. Capp regards the plot as a "fantasy of lies, and that the king had to fake

belief in it to ensure his brother to the throne after his death."<sup>59</sup> The situation can be best evidenced by noting that only a few notions regarding Catholics reached the level of becoming law, and this indicates that Charles did have some support.<sup>60</sup> Hence, my only plausible conclusion is that the Popish Plot was nothing more than a trip through fantasy land.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Kenyon, The Popish Plot (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>J. R. Jones, The Revolution of 1688 in England (Canada: George J. McLeod, 1972), pp. 175-78.

<sup>3</sup>John Kenyon, The Stuarts (Glasgow: William Collins and Sons, 1970), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup>Christopher Hill, The Century of Revolution, 1603-1674 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), pp. 193-94.

<sup>5</sup>Kenyon, Stuarts, pp. 103-04.

<sup>6</sup>D. L. Farmer, Britain and the Stuarts 1603-1714 (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), pp. 208-09.

<sup>7</sup>John Kenyon, Stuart England (London: Cox and Wyman, 1978), pp. 198-202.

<sup>8</sup>John Miller, Popery and Politics in England 1660-1688 (London: Cambridge at the University Press, 1973), pp. 51, 56, 66.

<sup>9</sup>Kenyon, Popish, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Kenyon, Stuart England, p. 208.

<sup>11</sup>Kenyon, Popish, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup>B. S. Capp, The Fifth Monarchy Men (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), pp. 40, 132, 158.

<sup>13</sup>Miller, pp. 67-90; 155-56.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 67-90; 155-56.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 67-90; 155-56.

<sup>16</sup>Hilaire Belloc, Charles II The Last Rally (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1939), pp. 107-110; 238-40.

<sup>17</sup>William McElwee, England's Precedence (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), pp. 251-52.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 229-49.

<sup>19</sup>Kenyon, Popish, pp. 8-10; 12-16.

<sup>20</sup>Farmer, p. 211.

<sup>21</sup>Hill, p. 194.

<sup>22</sup>Farmer, pp. 212-15.

<sup>23</sup>Belloc, Last Rally, pp. 115, 167f.

<sup>24</sup>David Kier, The Constitutional History of Modern Britain (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 251.

<sup>25</sup>Farmer, p. 220.

<sup>26</sup>McElwee, p. 254.

<sup>27</sup>Farmer, pp. 222-24.

<sup>28</sup>Kier, pp. 250-54.

<sup>29</sup>Richard Ollard, The Image of the King (New York: Halliday Lithograph, 1955), p. 103.

<sup>30</sup>Maurice Ashley, James II (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), pp. 112-114.

<sup>31</sup>Ollard, p. 103.

<sup>32</sup>Ashley, pp. 112-14.

<sup>33</sup>Kenyon, Stuarts, pp. 125-26.

<sup>34</sup>Kier, pp. 254-56.

<sup>35</sup>McElwee, p. 265.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>37</sup>Kenyon, Popish, pp. 32-3.

<sup>38</sup>Miller, p. 157.

<sup>39</sup>Ashley, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup>David Ogg, England in the Reign of Charles II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 589.

<sup>41</sup>John Kenyon, The Stuart Constitution (London: Cambridge Press, 1966), pp. 452-53.

<sup>42</sup>Ogg, pp. 559-62.

<sup>43</sup>Kenyon, Popish, pp. 46-50.



- <sup>44</sup>Ogg, p. 564.
- <sup>45</sup>Ollard, p. 154.
- <sup>46</sup>Miller, pp. 157-58.
- <sup>47</sup>Ogg, pp. 564-65.
- <sup>48</sup>Kenyon, Popish, pp. 58-9.
- <sup>49</sup>Ogg, pp. 564-65.
- <sup>50</sup>llard, p. 155.
- <sup>51</sup>Miller, p. 161.
- <sup>52</sup>Ogg, pp. 579-84.
- <sup>53</sup>John Dickson Carr, The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey (New York: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 310-43.
- <sup>54</sup>Ogg, 579-84.
- <sup>55</sup>Kenyon, Stuart England, pp. 212-13.
- <sup>56</sup>Miller, pp. 162, 169-74.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 162, 169-74.
- <sup>58</sup>Hilaire Belloc, James the Second (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company), p. 160.
- <sup>59</sup>Capp, p. 219.
- <sup>60</sup>Kenyon, Stuart, pp. 204-08.

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