

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT AND JAMES I'S ELIMINATION OF CATHOLICISM IN ENGLAND

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In the predawn hours of November 5th, 1605 darkness loomed above the English House of Parliament. Hiding below in a cold, damp cellar, a traitor hid with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder. He intended, with the strike of a match, to blow a hole through the heart of his nation, engulfing the King, the Commons, the Lords, and the Bishops in a ball of flame that would end seventy-five years of oppression. But before he could light that match, Guy Fawkes was discovered by the King's men, tortured, and executed for treason. He represented the most devilish intention of England's secret Catholics—to violently overthrow King James.¹ Or, at least, this is how the traditional story goes. The historical evidence suggests something else entirely. Fear has the power to inspire unprecedented change, to unite a divided nation, and in 1605, this is just what England needed to rid itself of its Catholic problem once and for all. The English government likely fabricated the details of what came to be known as the "Gunpowder Plot" and attributed blame to the Jesuits in order to turn public opinion against Catholics and justify the harsh laws that would ultimately end widespread Catholic recusancy and unite a nation that had been divided over faith for 75 years.

In 1530 King Henry VIII requested an annulment of his marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon and set into motion a chain of events that would ultimately result in the "Gunpowder Plot." Because he was Catholic, Henry could not divorce his

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¹ Alice Hogge, *God's Secret Agents* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 328.

wife without the approval of the Pope. Henry bullied England's leading theologians to validate the divorce, but Pope Clement VII refused. Nevertheless, Henry VIII exiled Catherine and married Anne Boleyn in 1533. A few months later, Clement excommunicated Henry, insisting that he leave Anne Boleyn and take back his exiled wife. Unwilling to submit to the Pope's authority, Henry split from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534 by enacting the Act of Supremacy, which established the new "Church of England" and installed the King as its Supreme Head.² With that single pen stroke, religion and politics became officially united in England's head of state. The Treason Act, passed later that year, made any denial of the Act of Supremacy punishable by death and reinforced that an enemy of the church was an enemy of the state.³ Initially, the Treason Act was only enforced against high ranking officials that publicly denied Henry's authority; aside from a few exceptional cases, the general public was left alone. Religious practice was largely unchanged given that Henry's disagreement was over papal authority, not doctrine. This meant all but England's top political class had no reason to be anti-Catholic aside from its de facto illegality under the Supremacy and Treason Acts. Most of Christendom was "catholic" until the Protestant Reformation in 1517, and most of England was Catholic until 1534. The Pope even bestowed upon Henry the title "Defender of the Faith" for his defense of the sacraments (including marriage) in 1521.⁴

While a good portion of England accepted the King's authority over the new Church, there remained a small, but extremely devout, contingent of Catholics—devout because they were the few that remained consciously loyal to their faith even though a conversion to Anglicanism would have been easy given the lack of doctrinal divergence between Catholicism and Anglicanism. This small group presented a new challenge to the state because, on account of their faith, they were, legally at least, in direct opposition to the King, yet, open religious persecution was unacceptable because it may have led to foreign intercession by European Catholic states such as France or Spain. This meant that from 1534 until the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, English monarchs tried to link Catholics to political violence in order to turn public

² *Act of Supremacy*, "Statutes of the Realm, III", 1534, accessed March 5, 2017, http://tudorplace.com.ar/Documents/the_act_of_supremacy.htm.

³ *Treason Act*, "Statutes of the Realm, III", 1534, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/1534treasons.htm>

⁴ Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 233.

opinion against them and justify their systematic elimination. The Catholics made this task all too easy.

Henry VIII's successor, Edward VI, died in 1553. Together, they had made significant progress against Catholicism by outlawing certain aspects of the Mass, exiling dissident intellectuals, instituting new common prayers, and establishing a slew of new statutes targeting Catholics. But all of this was undone when Henry's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, Mary I, a Catholic, took the throne. She reversed every statute, restored the traditional Mass, and welcomed back the exiled intellectuals. But Mary lost popular support when she tried and burned the heretical Anglican bishops and a large number of Protestants.⁵ When Elizabeth I took the crown in 1588, the country rejoiced.⁶ Mary's brutality in the name of Catholicism was exactly the justification Elizabeth needed to reinstate the Act of Supremacy and Treason Act and to strengthen the anti-Catholic laws that Mary had abolished. During the previous reigns, the Catholic threat was largely theoretical; it became real following Mary's brutality.

In 1570 Pius V compounded the situation by issuing the bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, which excommunicated Elizabeth I, released English Catholics from allegiance to her, and openly encouraged her overthrow.⁷ Before the bull, Catholics were enemies of the state according to the law; now they were enemies of the state by their own leader's admission. Alice Hogge, in her book "God's Secret Agents," sums this up best: "Pius had achieved what Protestant Parliamentarians had so far only dreamed of... he had given an anxious English nation the cast-iron proof that the more devout the Catholic, the more danger they presented to the realm."⁸ Although later Popes would try to soften Pius's radical stance, the damage was severe and unforgettable. Elizabeth instated harsher laws, even banning known Catholic judges from power.⁹ From 1570

⁵ "Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, *Death by Execution*", 1556, accessed March 5, 2017, <https://englishhistory.net/tudor/thomas-cranmer-death/>

⁶ Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 29.

⁷ Pope St. Pius V, "*Regnans in Excelsis*" (Rome: 1570), accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius05/p5regnans.htm>

⁸ Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 47.

⁹ J.P. Somerville, "Elizabeth I," *University of Wisconsin*, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-14.htm>

to 1605, fringe groups of Catholics would cite *Regnans in Excelsis* as justification for periodic revolts and coup attempts.

In 1588 the threat of overthrow became a reality when the Spanish Armada, representing the Catholic sphere, sailed on England with the specific purpose of deposing Elizabeth, the Anglican defector. Pope Sixtus V even promised Philip II, the Catholic King of Spain, one million gold ducats should the invasion succeed and a Catholic be installed on the throne.¹⁰ In July 1588, the Armada sailed to its last battle. Though Spain's fleet was better trained and equipped, its ships were too big. England's smaller, more maneuverable vessels tore through the Armada with overwhelming speed. This, and an unfortunate onset of storms, led to the Armada's defeat. England was safe from Catholic invaders but its fear of armed Catholic overthrow had been confirmed. If Mary's reign and *Regnans in Excelsis* did not prove the threat posed by England's secret Catholics, the Armada could not fail to do so. But even after the defeat, Rome would not give up on England's Catholics.

Throughout England, Catholic priests hid in secret, ministering to faithful Catholics. At the forefront of this mission was the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, a recently formed order of Catholic priests trained at various seminaries across Europe to speak numerous languages, memorize large sections of the Bible, and combat Protestant heresy with intellectual rigor.¹¹ Because it was both illegal to leave England and illegal to be a priest, the Jesuits lived in hiding, ministering only when it was safe. They were very successful in maintaining Catholic numbers and represented the heart of the English Catholic movement. Though they were constantly reminded in the seminary to avoid all matters of politics, to attend solely to matters of faith, the English state labeled them public enemies. They were viewed as agents of Rome, instigating subversion and plotting assassination. Elizabeth's successor, James I, manipulated these fears by tying the Jesuits to the Gunpowder Plot in order to justify the persecution and marginalization of Catholics.

When James I took the crown in 1603 the Catholic problem was at a tipping point. The combined effects of Mary I's reign, Pope Pius V's bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, and the attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada left England in an extremely volatile state. Due in part to both the actual events and the English state's propaganda

campaign, English people were afraid, and James I, if he was to have any success, needed to reassure them. He resolved to eliminate the practice of the Catholic faith in England. From the outset, James I proved to be a skilled political manipulator. Because Elizabeth I never married or had children during her 45 year reign, there was no clear successor after her death in 1603. So when James I, son of Mary I, became the king, he needed all the support he could muster, even from the Catholics. Pope Clement VIII had written a letter to England's Catholics saying "that none should consent to any successor upon Elizabeth's death, however near in blood, who would not... with all his might set forward the Catholic religion."¹² So out of pure political expediency and a desire to meet Clement VIII's demand James flirted with Catholicism by knighting some of the families that were loyal to his late Catholic mother, Mary I, and releasing and banishing many of the priests Elizabeth had imprisoned. Catholics were hopeful that James would be friendly to their cause. Henry Garnet, the secret Jesuit superior in England, even wrote a letter to James promising his Order's support for the new king. But to James this was all a political power play. Once he satisfied every politically connected party and secured his position, he spoke his mind. "No, no," he was purported to have said, "we'll not need the papists now!"¹³

During his first parliamentary session in 1604, James passed the *Act for the due execution of the Statutes against Jesuits, Seminary Priests, Recusants, etc.*, which upheld all of Elizabeth's existing laws and added a few more.¹⁴ In August of that year, he brokered a peace treaty with Spain, one of England's longstanding enemies.¹⁵ Previously, England persecuted Catholics on the grounds that they might rise up in the event of a second Spanish invasion. But now that the threat of invasion was neutralized, England needed new justification for its persecutions. Because he could not persecute Catholics solely based on their faith, James needed to tie the Catholics to some non-religious crime if he wanted to eliminate them and maintain public approval. This opportunity came in 1605 when Guy Fawkes, Robert Catesby, Thomas Wintour, Thomas Percy, and Jack Wright attempted to blow up Parliament. After 75 years of persecution and the false hope that James I might bring relief, these five Catholics decided to resolve the

10 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 3.

11 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 13-14.

12 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 293.

13 Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of England, Vol. I, 1603-1642* (London: Longmans, Green, 1883), 100.

14 Gardiner, *History of England*, 202-203.

15 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 324.

conflict on their own once and for all. In the days and weeks following the Gunpowder Plot of November 5th, James' government captured the purported conspirators and fabricated an official story based on their shaky testimonies and questionable evidence. That story goes as follows.

On May 20, 1604 Fawkes, Catesby, Wintour, Percy, and Wright met at a London inn to discuss the beginnings of the plot and take an oath of secrecy. They then went to the adjacent room and had Mass, celebrated by the Jesuit Father John Gerard. The five then bought a house with a cellar that extended under the Parliament building and spent the next year stocking it with 36 barrels of gunpowder. In June 1605, Jesuit Father Oswald Tesimond told his superior, Father Henry Garnet of the plot, but to maintain the secret, he did so under the sacred seal of confession. Just hours later, Garnet wrote a letter to Father Claudio Aquaviva, the Jesuit Superior General in Rome, warning him of a potential uprising but expressing enough ambivalence to show that he was not wholly against it. On October 26, 1605, the government was tipped off to the plot when a servant of Lord Mounteagle was walking through the street and an unnamed man handed him an unsigned letter of warning. The servant brought the letter to Lord Mounteagle, who delivered it to Robert Cecil, a member of the King's council, who in turn waited for James to return from his hunting trip on November 1st to inform him of the letter. It wasn't until November 4th that a search was conducted in and around Parliament. The first search turned up nothing. During a second search in the early hours of November 5, 1605, the King's agents discovered Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder, stopping the attack only hours before the start of the Parliamentary session.¹⁶ This is the version of events that James and his government made public. However, according to the evidence, this story is marked with enough errors to suggest that it was falsified.

There had been frequent plots since 1530, most were harmless, and none were linked to the Jesuits. But despite the Jesuits' lack of involvement, James needed to tie them to the plot because they represented the Catholic movement in England. Without the Jesuits' involvement James knew that the entire Catholic population would not be personified by a few radicals, and the Gunpowder Plot would be viewed as another insignificant attempt at overthrow. So instead, James manipulated the evidence and fabricated at least three key pieces to implicate the Jesuits. James' fabricated evidence

likely accounts for three crucial points in the traditional story: Father Tesimond's incriminating confession to Father Garnet, Garnet's subsequent letter to Aquaviva, and the expository letter delivered to James by Lord Mounteagle. The confession probably never happened, and the letters were almost certainly tampered with or forged.

That Tesimond confessed to Garnet is based on Garnet's own testimony from March 8, 1606. However, the testimony is suspect because Garnet had been in custody since January 27th and had not said a word, even after torture. Additionally, the government had recently learned the limits of torture. A month earlier they accidentally tortured Nicholas Owen to death and did a sloppy job covering it up, creating outrage amongst Catholics and embarrassment for themselves.¹⁷ Owen, one of the key figures in the Jesuit mission, withheld his secrets even unto death. The examiners were probably worried that Garnet would do the same, so they fabricated his testimony. Five days before he confessed, Garnet wrote a secret letter to his friends outside the prison, saying, "I see no advantage they have against me for the powder action."¹⁸ On this same day, Robert Cecil, a member of James's Privy Council and the man who was in charge of Garnet's interrogation, wrote a letter assuring his correspondent, "that ere many days he should hear that Father Garnet... was laid open for a principal conspirator."¹⁹ It seems all too convenient that Cecil gave this assurance just days before it was proven true. After two months of torture, 20 years of hiding, escaping, and living a life of constant secrecy, how could Garnet flip in five days? The examiners' notes reveal just how important Garnet's testimony was: "We are now therefore not to arraign Garnet the Jesuit... but to unmask and arraign that misnamed presumptuous Society of Our Savior Jesus."²⁰ The government attempted "to prove to all the world that it is not for their religion, but for their treasonable teachings and practices that they should be exterminated."²¹

17 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 365.

18 Henry Garnet, "Letter to Friends", March 3, 1606.

19 Robert Cecil, "Letter to Sir H. Brouncker" (Calendar of the State Papers, Relating to Ireland: 1603-1606, 1872), accessed March 5, 2017, <https://books.google.com/books?id=o9MsAQAAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

20 Robert Cecil, *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Volume 17, 1605* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1938), 412-413, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-cecil-papers/vol17/pp570-649>.

21 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 366.

16 *Ibid.*

Garnet's testimony was enough for James to proceed against the Jesuits and the Catholics, but he reinforced his position by manipulating the letter that Garnet sent to Aquaviva after Tesimond's supposed confession. The evidence of forgery is a letter from a spy named Arthur Gregory to Robert Cecil dated 1606, a year after the discovery of the plot. Gregory asked for payment for his efforts as an informer. Usually these informers promised some new piece of evidence should they be paid. But Gregory referenced services he had already done—"secret services... that none but myself has done before." This service was "to write in another man's hand."²² The original letter no longer exists, but there are two remaining copies. The first is in the Public Records Office in England, the second is in Jesuit records.²³ The first version, the one that James would have used, is not written in Garnet's handwriting and only includes the first half of the letter, which admittedly sounds ambivalent towards whatever threat Garnet was referencing. This ambivalence was enough for James to conclude that the Jesuits were not opposed to the plot and therefore were accessories to treason. The Jesuit version—written in Garnet's hand—includes a second half that expressly counsels the Pope to issue a statement of disapproval. The fact that the Jesuits even have the letter written after Tesimond's confession would seem to contradict the argument that the confession never took place, but was fabricated by the government. However, the letter does not actually mention Tesimond, Catesby, or the specifics of the plot. It only mentions treason. Certainly Garnet was aware that Catesby was up to no good, but evidenced in Garnet's frequent letters to Rome, Garnet made every effort to never hear the details from Catesby in order to obey his superior's order to avoid political matters. It is more likely that Garnet was merely referencing these vague threats. The government probably knew of the letter. So when they fabricated Garnet's testimony about Tesimond's confession, they set the date of the confession just before the date of the letter. They ordered the two events such that the letter seemed to be a response to Tesimond's confession when in fact it was not. Then they removed the part of the letter that told the Pope to disapprove so that the letter would sound entirely supportive of the bombing.

²² Arthur Gregory, *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Volume 18, 1605* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office), 47-49.

²³ Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 340.

Casting further doubt on the story's validity is the initial letter obtained by Mounteagle's servant. The government claimed to have received the letter of warning on October 26, 1605 from Lord Mounteagle, who received it from his servant, and he from an unknown man in the street.²⁴ How did the unidentified man know of the plot, and why would he not deliver the letter to James's cabinet himself as it surely would have won him favor at court? The government probably knew of the plot long in advance—perhaps one of the conspirators was an inside man, however there is no evidence to prove this—but instead of arresting the plotters, they let it unfold so that they could manipulate the event to incriminate the Catholics. In order to make their knowledge of the plot seem natural, the government delivered a letter to itself. This would also explain why the government waited nine days to conduct a search. If Robert Cecil had learned of an attempt on the King's life, he wouldn't have waited six days to inform the King and take protective measures. Those protective measures would have consisted of more than a routine search of the area. James let the conspirators play into his trap.

An additional flaw in James's account is that all the conspirators denied that the Jesuits knew of the plot. The government said that because Father John Gerard celebrated Mass for the conspirators on May 20, 1604, he was accessory to the crime. But the statement about Gerard celebrating Mass was gathered from Guy Fawkes after he was tortured repeatedly.²⁵ Even then, Fawkes denied that Gerard knew. For the rest of his life after escaping England, Gerard denied that he was even there. He claimed it was likely that the conspirators never met him and instead confused him for one of the other two priests that often used the same house.²⁶ As for the other conspirators, they either never admitted Gerard's involvement, even under severe

²⁴ Letter to Lord Mounteagle, October 26, 1605, Domestic State Papers 14/216/2, National Archives, Kew, England, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/gunpowder-plot/source-1/>.

²⁵ William Waad, "Letter to Robert Cecil", *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Vol. XVII, 1605* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1883), 479, accessed March 5, 2017, https://archive.org/details/calendarofmanusc17grea_0.

²⁶ John Gerard, *The Condition of Catholics under James I: Father Gerard's Narrative of the Gunpowder Plot*, trans. John Morris, S.J. (London: Longmans, Green, 1871), ccxxiii-ccxxv.; John Gerard, *The Condition of Catholics under James I: Father Gerard's Narrative of the Gunpowder Plot*, trans. John Morris, S.J. (London: Longmans, Green, 1871), 201.

torture, or simply had nothing to say. Furthermore, during Father Henry Garnet's trial in front of James's Privy Council, Garnet asked for each of the witnesses to be questioned again, confident that none would indicate him in the crime even after torture. Alice Hogge puts the next line best: "With no one giving it the information it wanted the Government was forced to go hunting for itself."²⁷

Finally, the most broad and overarching inconsistency is that all correspondence from the time indicates that the Jesuits were not involved. The Jesuits made every effort to avoid scandal because they knew they represented Rome in England and did not want to mistakenly indicate the mother Church in any crimes. In 1603, Father Aquaviva wrote to Garnet: "Shun every species of activity that might make priests of our Order hated by the world and branded instigators of tragedy."²⁸ That is why when Catesby began to hint at some secret uprising to Garnet, Garnet asked for Catesby's assurance that he would abstain from further action. In a letter to a Catholic friend dated October 1603, Garnet wrote, "I earnestly desired him that he and Mr. Thomas Wintour would not join with any such tumults... He assured me that he would not."²⁹ Since this letter was to a fellow Catholic, Garnet had little reason to lie. The Jesuits were so deeply embedded amongst the small Catholic community that Garnet would not distrust his contact. Garnet likely hid at this person's house at some point during his mission. If he could trust his friend with his life, surely he could trust her with rumors of a secret plot. The Jesuit's unwillingness to participate is probably why Catesby grew increasingly distant from his long time spiritual mentor in the months leading up to November 5th. According to Father Tesimond, Catesby "began to say openly... that the Jesuits were getting in the way of the good Catholics could do themselves."³⁰ Catesby would not have said this if the Jesuits instructed him to carry out the plot or were helping him do so.

In the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, James I passed the Oath of Allegiance, which stated that the King had ultimate authority over the realm and that the Pope had no authority to depose him. By the Pope's orders, Catholics were not allowed to

27 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 351.

28 Philip Caraman S.J., *Henry Garnet 1555-1606 and the Gunpowder Plot* (London: Longmans, Green, 1964), 310.

29 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 331.

30 Oswald Tesimond S.J., *The Gunpowder Plot*, trans. Francis Edwards, S.J. (London: Folio Society, 1973), 81.

take the Oath. In addition, known Catholics were forbidden to enter a royal palace, to come within ten miles of London, to practice law or medicine, to hold commission in the Army or Navy, to hold public office, or to bear arms. It became legal for any officer to enter a known Catholic's house, and recusancy fines were raised yet again.³¹ In effect, Catholicism was eviscerated in England. The Jesuit mission continued, but most Catholics joined the Church of England, fled to the colonies, or simply refused to house and support missionary priests. It wasn't until 1829 that Catholics regained all their rights, including the right to worship.³²

James I accomplished all of this through fear, which drove a nation to outlaw an entire faith. Fear has the power to inspire change and unite a divided nation against a common enemy. And it often has the power to justify unimaginable means to accomplish evil ends. In the 1930s and 40s, Hitler employed a similar tactic, blaming Germany's problems on the Jews. Through fear he rose to power, and through fear he inspired a mass movement to eliminate a faith. In our own time, "Gunpowder Plots" still exist. After the September 11th attacks, Americans united around the fear of terrorism. The Patriot Act, a comprehensive anti-terrorism law, was passed with nearly unanimous support.³³ Depending on one's view, it was the best or worst measure in the fight against terror. Even more recently, America elected its president based less on support for Donald Trump than on fear of what Hillary Clinton might do. Now Trump's critics are united against him in fear of what he might do. The story of England's systematic persecution of Catholics should be a warning to beware of political tactics that inspire unity around division primarily by fear. We are not united if we are united against each other.

31 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 380.

32 Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 384.

33 "The USA Patriot Act: Preserving Life and Liberty," *Justice.gov*, accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ll/highlights.htm>

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