

Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

Royalist Agents, Conspirators and Spies: Their Role in the British Civil Wars, 1640-1660

Review Number: 1258
Publish Date: Thursday, 24 May, 2012
Author: Geoffrey Smith
ISBN: 9780754666936
Date of Publication: 2011
Price: £60.00
Pages: 252pp.
Publisher: Ashgate
Publisher URL:
Place of Publication: Farnham
Reviewer: Kirsteen MacKenzie

This is a fascinating and absorbing account of Royalist conspiracy and spies throughout the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth and Protectorate. It highlights the increasing importance of underground Royalist activity as the Stuart monarchs failed to regain their kingdoms. It also gives an insight into how the Royalist effort was organised and managed, especially the Royalists' ability to communicate across, counties, countries and even continents. It demonstrates the diverse backgrounds of Royalist agents and shows their cause was dependent upon individual talents, and was affected by the weaknesses of these spies due to a lack of overall direction.

In contrast to previous accounts, Smith's begins in 1641 and not in 1649. It is argued that Charles I resorted to intrigue when the normal political channels were not capable of achieving the King's desired aims. Smith argues that the genesis of the King's own intelligence network emerged from the Bishops' Wars against the Scottish Covenanters and that Royalist emigration to the continent began after the impeachment of Thomas Wentworth, the Earl of Strafford. Plots had emerged out of the discontentment felt by army officers in the wake of defeat during the Bishops' Wars. However, weaknesses in Royalist conspiracy, which later became common features of Royalist plots, can be seen in these early stages. Furthermore, the infamous army plots of 1641 were disorganised, with plotters not acting with the approval of their commanders and without agreed objectives. They were inaccurate, unrealistic and muddled, with no security measures in place. The plots diminished the Crown's standing.

As Smith points out, during the early years of the war Royalist spy networks were created within areas of English Parliamentary support. In particular, there was a small group of loyal Royalists in

London who established clandestine communications between the capital and Oxford. Many women played an important role in outwitting Parliamentary officers, despite restrictions on movement.

Smith maintains that the true nature of the Waller plot, which still baffles many historians, was purposefully misrepresented by John Pym in order to destroy the Peace Party in the Commons and to demoralise Royalists in London. Smith argues that during this period there was no overall direction and no established hierarchy of authority amongst those involved in Royalist espionage.

It was during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms that a Royalist espionage network was built up and grew throughout Stuart kingdoms and the European continent. Military failures at home spurred on Royalist espionage and the necessity of having to find new ways to defeat their opponents by other means. Indeed, the Queen had developed her own network of agents in order to secure lines of communication between her, her husband and his supporters, especially when she left Oxford for the continent. At this stage Smith points out there was very little difference between spies and foreign diplomats at this time. In fact, many people working for the King would have seen themselves as diplomats rather than spies. As the King became more desperate for help the more he would rely on unrealistic and hair-brained schemes. In addition, as Smith points out, Charles I was sometimes his own worst enemy. The King completely failed to understand how his efforts to gain support from Ireland might be interpreted and did not fully comprehend the nature of the divisions in Ireland.

After the defeat of Charles I there were two broad options open to Royalists, surrender and live a quiet life in Britain, or carry on the fight by clandestine means at home and abroad. Royalist agents were then given prominent positions and were able to display their loyalty to the Stuart cause. The most significant problem for the King and his agents during this period was the King's ability to communicate with his supporters and his court in exile. People working for the King's household were vetted and the personnel were changed on a regular basis. As the grip of the English Parliamentarians tightened Royalists had to resort to disguises and elaborate plots. Many of these failed but notably one did succeed which involved dressing James, the Duke of York, as a young girl who then caught a boat to Europe. Charles I himself was the subject of many plots for escape which had all failed by late 1648 and Charles I was executed in January 1649. The failure of such seemingly small, regular and insignificant plots, as Smith clearly highlights, had a major impact on momentous events.

There were varied reactions to the King's execution amongst Royalists, some chose seclusion and study and others continued fighting for the Royalist cause. Smith focuses on those who wanted to continue serving the Stuart monarchy in difficult and dangerous circumstances. There were still many roles open to Royalist conspirators from diplomacy to skulduggery. However, during this time Royalist agents were scattered all over Europe trying to raise support and arms for the King. They were in Germany, Ireland, the Low Countries and Jersey. In addition, with the deposition of the King, the work of the agents was less legally accredited and it was therefore more difficult to gain support. Charles II did organise diplomatic retinues to visit the various courts in Europe but due to his alliance with the Scottish Covenanters in 1650 many of the best diplomats were rooted out due to their lack of commitment to the Covenant. Charles was also prevented from creating a broad alliance between the Royalists and Presbyterians due to the stringent demands of the Scottish Kirk. The Commonwealth had increased its patrols of the seas surrounding Britain and Ireland and this further restricted Charles II's means of communication with his agents and his exiled court. As Smith states, the Battle of Worcester was the 'endgame' for Charles whereby agents on both sides of the border were crushed, captured and exiled.

Smith highlights the many problems, issues and conflicts which Charles II and his agents had to endure during the 1650s. The major issue was trying to overcome the organised and effective intelligence network of John Thurloe, England's Secretary of State. In addition, there were difficulties within the exiled court at this time with court factions constantly changing and bitterness

becoming particularly acute. Many Royalist agents fell foul of the shifting sands but some, like Daniel O’Neil, were adept at dealing with such situations and it was often these agents who survived. The Sealed Knot, the well known intelligence network, was set up with the blessing of the King but Smith believes that this was a mistake because it was easily undermined by factionalism in the court. Charles II had another major problem at this time; his diplomats were being squeezed out of European countries due to the increasing acceptance of, and interaction with, the English Commonwealth by major European powers. European princes stopped investing in what they believed was a floundering Royalist cause. The Royal household became even more dispersed and communications were increasingly more difficult. Plots continued to be organised during this period but were quickly suppressed. .

As Smith argues, Royalist spies became increasingly desperate and demoralised by the failure of Penruddock’s rising and other plots and the spies resorted to one of the few options left open to them – the assassination of Oliver Cromwell. These plots were easily discovered but, as Smith points out, the failure of these plots should not merely be attributed to the efficiency of Thurloe’s intelligence system but also to the failure of the Royalists to keep their own network of spies loyal and secure. Smith highlights the significant impact those Royalist spies who worked for Thurloe had on undermining the Royalist cause.

The exiled court could not sustain such plots and therefore began to look towards the Spanish for some assistance. The Spanish had recently gone to war with Cromwell. Spain did maintain a Royalist army in Flanders for the King and this alliance with Spain revived the employment opportunities for Royalist agents. Flanders became the new hub of Royalist intrigue. However, ultimately, Charles was restrained from marching into England as head of a Spanish army, knowing the English fear of popery would ultimately strengthen the hand of Cromwell’s regime. By 1658 Charles II’s Flanders army had lost too many men to be of assistance to him and there was a sense of disarray and despair amongst Royalists. Royalist plotters were disappointed with the lack of opportunities due to the death of Oliver Cromwell and turned their focus on a broad alliance with the Presbyterians but these plots, centred on Booth’s rising, ultimately failed, leaving the Crown dependent upon the Spanish monarchy once again. Furthermore, the confusing situation after the collapse of the Restored Commonwealth did not improve matters for Charles, since the ports had been closed and General Monck’s motives and movements were a mystery to Royalists, both at home and abroad. Those who were agents for the King were not all rewarded equally, or rewarded at all, at the Restoration.

This book is a continuation of Geoffrey Smith’s research into Royalist exiles during the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth, a companion volume and follow up to Smith’s *The Cavaliers in Exile 1640-1660* which examined life for the exiled Royalist community in Europe between 1640-60.⁽¹⁾ Many themes discussed in *Royalist Agents, Conspirators and Spies* can also be found in this preceding work; the traffic of exiles between Britain and Europe over a 20-year period and an attempt to avoid an overtly negative view of Royalist exile. Similarly, he discusses the court divisions which made it difficult for the exiled community to present a united front. The major difference between *Royalist Agents, Conspirators and Spies* and the *Cavaliers in Exile* is that *Royalist Conspiracy* exclusively deals with those who took part in plots and conspiracy to restore the King, both within the exiled community abroad, as well as those at home. *Cavaliers in Exile* examines Royalist conspiracy more briefly and within the wider context of the overall experience of the Royalist in exile.

Royalist Agents, Conspirators and Spies fits within two major historiographical themes; Royalist conspiracy and the exiled Royalist court. It is also part of a continuing and rapidly expanding historiography about the Royalists during the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth. In the past five years there has been an explosion of interest in Royalists and Royalism from various perspectives, such as defining and rethinking Royalist politics, Royalist propaganda and finally the exiled Royalist

community during the 1640s and 1650s. In particular, a set of essays edited by Philip Major (2) has looked at Royalists in exile, but like Smith's *Cavaliers in Exile* it mainly deals with the experience of the Royalist exiles in Europe. Therefore, in light of recent historiographical trends, Geoffrey Smith's volume on Royalist spies is a very welcome addition to the emerging literature.

Of course, Smith's book is not the first of its kind to explore the theme of Royalist plots, conspiracy and intelligence. Before the publication of Smith's book, David Underdown's *Royalist Conspiracy 1649-1660* (3) was the established text on such themes. However, this groundbreaking work was published over four decades ago and Royalist intrigue now merits further investigation and revision, especially in light of the changing historiographical trends and developments over the past four decades. Smith's account differs greatly from that of David Underdown and makes some important contributions to our understanding of Royalist intrigue during the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth. Smith recognises that Royalist conspiracy does not begin with the King's execution in 1649, that it was something which existed throughout the 1640s. Therefore, Royalist intrigue was not a knee-jerk reaction to the execution of Charles I but something which had developed and matured over time. As a result, Royalists appear more experienced in the politics of espionage than has hitherto been acknowledged. David Underdown's book largely concentrated on the failure of Royalist conspiracy at home, whereas Smith concentrates on the impact of the successes and failures of Royalist conspiracy on the Royalist cause, both at home and abroad. Importantly, Smith's book also highlights that Royalist intrigue was often used when ordinary political channels became blocked or were non-existent. Indeed, a particular strength of Smith's account is the great character sketches he draws of the persons involved in conspiracy, people from various backgrounds with many different strengths and weaknesses. Some quiet, some adventurous, some loyal and some who betrayed the Royalist cause. This moves away from Underdown's simple division of a stable Sealed Knot versus a boisterous and maverick Action Party. As Smith shows, many agents changed tactics, plans and loyalties due to the circumstances they found themselves in at different times. The variety of people involved in Royalist intrigue constantly changed throughout the years between 1640 and 1660. Overall, this is a fascinating account of Royalist intrigue during the mid 17th century which highlights that Royalist conspiracy was not a marginal and defensive reaction to defeat, but an integral part of the Royalist cause.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Smith, *The Cavaliers in Exile 1640-60* (Basingstoke, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Literatures of Exile in the English Revolution and its Aftermath, 1640-1690*, ed. Philip Major (London, 2010). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Underdown, *Royalist Conspiracy 1649-1660* (New Haven, CT, 1960). [Back to \(3\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1258/>

Links:

[\[1\]](#)
<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/royalist-agents-conspirators-and-spies-their-role-in-the-british-civil-wars-1640-1660/>