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State Papers of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I: the Archives and the Documents

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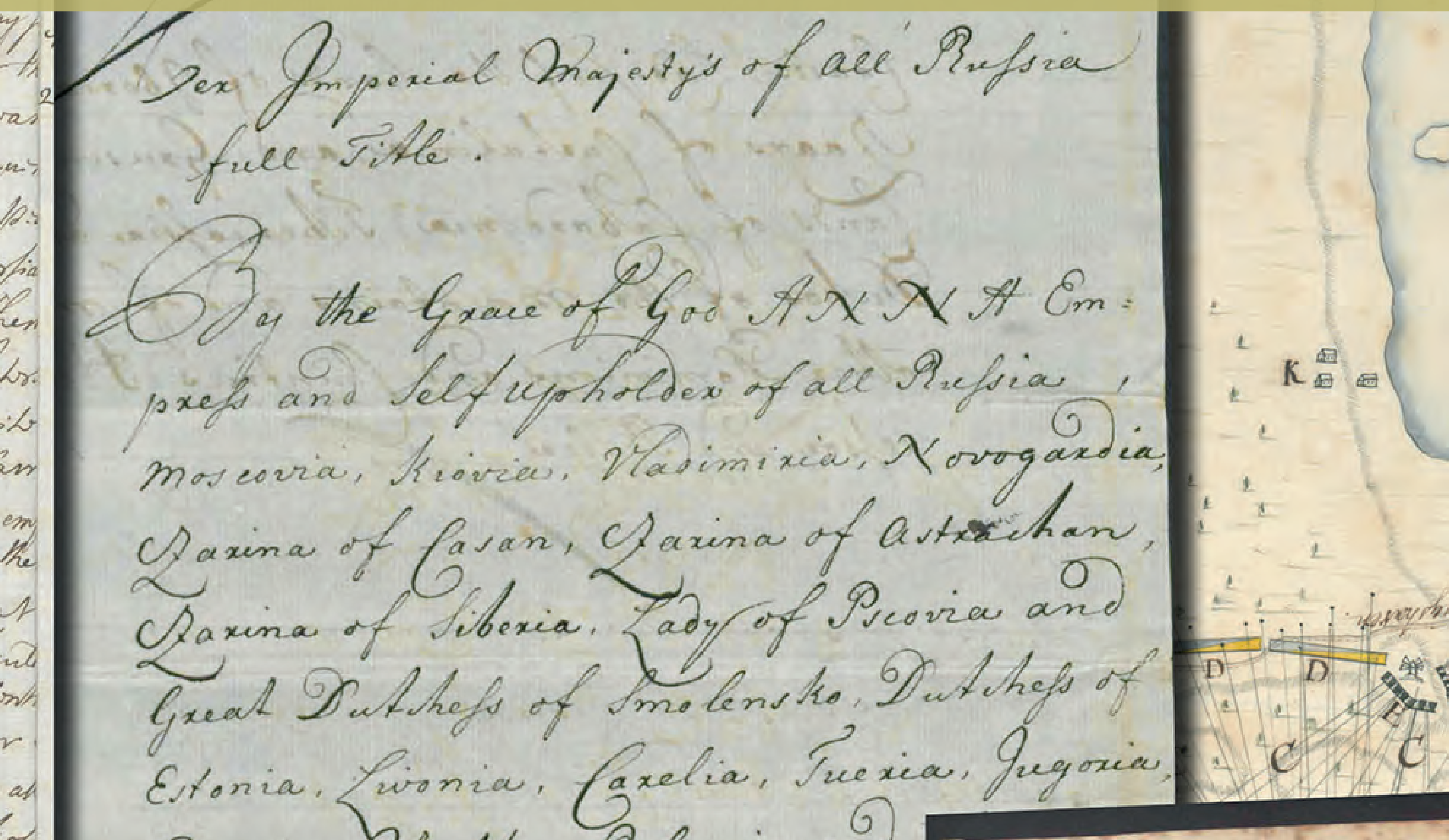

Her Imperial Majesty's of all Russia
full Title.

By the Grace of God ANNA Em:
press and Selfupholder of all Russia,
Moscovia, Kiovia, Vladimiria, Novogardia,
Tzarina of Casan, Tzarina of Astrachan,
Tzarina of Siberia, Lady of Pscovia and
Great Dutchess of Smolensko, Dutchess of
Estonia, Livonia, Carelia, Tveria, Jugoria,

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Today's Archive

The first thing to understand about the sources that you can read in *State Papers Online* is that they really belong together. Over four hundred years ago they comprised the day-to-day working papers of the King's or Queen's Principal Secretary, sometimes called the Secretary of State. Very late in the sixteenth century, for all kinds of reasons, they began to be broken up, to disappear off into private libraries and public repositories.

The purpose of this short section is to explain something about these modern collections, what they are, and where they came from. Once we know this, we can peel away another layer and begin to understand something about the royal Secretary and his archive.

A: The State Papers

The natural place to begin is with the State Papers in The National Archives in Kew in London. The Secretary's papers were government papers. Over the centuries they have been arranged in different ways in what was called, until 1858, the State Paper Office. In the seventeenth century they were roughly divided into two heads of 'Domestical' and 'Foreign'. For many years various Keepers of the papers and Commissioners tried to index and calendar them properly. It was only in the middle of the nineteenth century, when they were moved from the State Paper Office in St John's Chapel in the White Tower of the Tower of London, that a great effort was made to sort them out once and for all.[1] (See Dr C. S. Knighton's essay on the Calendars). The State Papers Domestic cover the reigns of Edward VI, 1547-53 (SP 10); Mary I, 1553-58 (SP 11), Elizabeth I, 1558-1603 (SP 12 and SP 13); and what are known as volumes of 'Addenda' (SP 15), which have most to do with affairs in the North of England.

B: Cecil Papers (Hatfield House Library, Hertfordshire)

We thank Sir William Cecil, later first Baron of Burghley (1520-98) (See Dr S. Alford's essay on Burghley), for the hundreds of volumes of papers that survive for Elizabeth's reign. He kept a vast political archive for which we know he had special indexes. The great masses of paper were stored in all kinds of places: in the various Tudor royal palaces, especially Whitehall; and in his great houses of Theobalds in Hertfordshire and Cecil (or Burghley) House on the Strand in Westminster. Many of his papers are in the State Papers at The National Archives and in the Lansdowne and Cotton collections of the British Library. However, many volumes, known as the Cecil Papers or Salisbury Manuscripts, are in the private library of the Marquess of Salisbury at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire.

When Burghley died in 1598 he left his papers to his son Sir Robert Cecil (1563–1612), like his father, Principal Secretary and later Earl of Salisbury, and a very senior member of the government of James VI. Burghley bequeathed to Robert 'my writings concerning the Queenes causes either for hir Revenue or for affayers of Counsell or state, to be advisedly perused by him'. They have been at Hatfield ever since and were calendared by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts from 1883.[2]

C: Lansdowne Manuscripts or 'Burghley Papers' (British Library, London)

The first part of what today are the Lansdowne Manuscripts in the British Library were detached from Lord Burghley's papers in the years after his death in 1598. They were in the possession of one of Burghley's former secretaries, Michael Hickes (1543–1612), and stayed in his family until about 1682 when they went to a London stationer called Richard Chiswell. Chiswell passed them to John Strype (1643–1737), the antiquary and biographer, who used them in his work. Eventually they were bought by William Petty, second Earl of Shelburne and first Marquess of Lansdowne (1737-1805). The British Museum bought the Lansdowne Manuscripts for £4,925 in 1807. The catalogue of the Lansdowne Manuscripts was published between 1812 and 1819. It is a very basic catalogue by modern standards but it is generally accurate.

D: Cotton Manuscripts (British Library, London)

Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), antiquary and politician, was a great collector of manuscripts. He built a fabulous library which was used by other scholars working on historical projects. If the names of the Cotton volumes sound eccentric – Augustus, Caligula, Nero – it was because Cotton arranged the volumes in great book presses marked by the busts of the Roman emperors. The important thing to understand about the Cotton Manuscripts is that many of them were acquired by Sir Robert from his contacts in the State Paper Office. These are, in effect, official State Papers as well as the private papers of Elizabeth I's Secretaries.

The essential guides to the Cotton Manuscripts are both by Colin G. C. Tite: *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton* (London: British Library, 1994); and *The Early Records of Sir Robert Cotton's Library: Formation, Cataloguing, Use* (London, 2003). *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and his Legacy*, ed. C. J. Wright (London, 1997) is also valuable. The catalogue of the Cotton Manuscripts was published in 1819. It is crude by modern standards but roughly takes you to where you need to be. It is much better to trust the item number than to work by the folio number; many volumes have been re-foliated two or three or even four times and the folio number of the catalogue has long been superseded.

The Principal Secretary

'For the secretary ... was the eare and mynd of the prince, yea her penne & mouth ...' (Manuscript / Calendar) So said Sir Walter Mildmay, one of Elizabeth I's privy councillors, in 1587. Mildmay had a very good measure of who and what the Principal Secretary was.[3] Very broadly speaking, medieval English government was located in the royal Chancery, where the Lord Chancellor sent out official documents from the King bearing great wax seals that showed their authenticity. But by the late sixteenth century practices in government had changed a little bit. The great formal documents of the reigns of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I bore seals, certainly, yet the day-to-day running of the Tudor government machine was much more the responsibility of the King's or Queen's

Secretary than it was the business of the Lord Chancellor.[4]

There is no doubt that the Principal Secretary became a much more important figure at Court as the years went on. His status in Parliament was enhanced by law in 1539 (31 Henry VIII, c. 10). The Secretary became a powerful political figure. Thomas Cromwell showed what could be done in the office; others, like William Paget and William Petre, followed him. All worked at the heart of government. It was a punishing job. Generally there were two serving Secretaries from the 1540s and this helped to ease the heavy burden of the work slightly. For the first part of Elizabeth's reign, 1558-72, there was only one Principal Secretary, Sir William Cecil.

The Secretary was able to see the monarch every day: indeed his job demanded it. He acted in effect as private secretary to the King or Queen, taking into the monarch's private rooms at Court papers for signature. He became in effect the Queen's voice in drafting royal proclamations, writing letters to ambassadors abroad and foreign potentates and so on. The Secretary also read papers to the Queen at her invitation.

The Secretary presided over a busy secretariat of clerks of the Council and Signet. In practice he chaired meetings of the Queen's Privy Council held almost every day wherever the Royal Court happened to be. This meant that the secretariat was always on the move and for its daily business worked out of a great Council chest which had its own keeper.[5]

So the Secretary was at the hub of the administration and at the centre of Tudor politics. Some Secretaries excelled at Court; they were confident and powerful. Sir William Cecil and Sir Francis Walsingham were two of them. Others found the politics difficult, even treacherous, for all their administrative skills. At times Sir Thomas Smith felt ignored and sidelined, and William Davison found himself in the Tower of London after being blamed for the allowing Mary Stuart's signed death warrant to get to Fotheringhay Castle without the Queen's knowledge.

The best Elizabethan account of the office of Secretary was written in 1592 by Robert Beale (1541–1601), a long-serving Clerk of the Council. He called it 'A Treatise of the Office of a Councellor and Principall Secretarie to her Majestie'. We can see from the 'Treatise' what a big job it was, covering all aspects of domestic affairs, home defence, foreign relations, intelligence work and security.[6] Beale revealed the tricks of the Secretary's trade: 'When ther shalbe anie unpleasant matter to be imparted to her Majestie from the Councell or other matters to be done of great importance,' he wrote, 'let not the burden be layed on you alone but let the rest joyne with you.'[7] And it was important, too, to be able to judge Elizabeth's mood before dealing with business: 'Learne before your accesse her Majesties disposicion by some in the Privie Chamber with whom you must keepe credit, for that will stande you in much steede ...'[8]

The Secretary's archive

Robert Beale's 'Treatise' shows us that the Secretary had to know every nook and cranny of Elizabeth I's kingdoms. To be successful, he had to know what was going on; and in order to know what was going on, he had to be sure that the papers sent to him came

promptly and then were filed away efficiently. It had to be a very slick operation. Anyone who looks carefully at the papers of the Principal Secretaries soon gets to know the habits of their senders and recipients. Letters and reports were folded and addressed (or 'superscribed') and sealed with wax, for which last purpose the sender would have a stamp or seal-die. The personal seal-die of Sir Thomas Smith, a Principal Secretary from 1572, is in the British Museum; it is a beautiful object, silver with an ivory handle.[9]

The letters were carried by couriers on established postal routes up and down the kingdom and from abroad. They were received by the Principal Secretary's clerks, either one of his private household secretaries or perhaps one of the Clerks of the Council. They were read, and in places we see that the Secretary marked important passages to be noted. Then every letter, however unimportant it was in the great scheme of things, was endorsed: this means that the writer's name and the date of the letter (not the date of its receipt) were written on the folded letter, and often the subject of the correspondence too. Endorsed papers could then be filed away in the working archive of the secretariat and easily retrieved when they were needed.

We can imagine just how much paper clogged the Secretaries' archive. We have to guess at how it was organised. Papers were not stitched into volumes: this is how they look today, but that was the work of the Victorian archivists who sorted out the great masses of paper that had accumulated by the middle of the nineteenth century. Late in his life Lord Burghley sent Sir Robert Cecil to look for 'a bigg paper Booke in folio entituled Mattars of France' which had an 'Alphabet' or index. Surely there was no other way to make sense of the many thousands of documents in the working archives of Elizabeth's government.[10]

Principal Secretaries 1516-1603

1516	Dr Richard Pace
1526	Dr William Knight
1528	Dr Stephen Gardiner
1533	Thomas Cromwell (Lord Privy Seal, July 1536)
1540 Mar.	Sir Thomas Wriothesley
	Sir Ralph Sadler
1543 23 Apr.	Sir William Paget
1544 Mar.	Sir William Petre
1548 17 Apr.	Sir Thomas Smith
1549 15 Oct.	Dr Nicholas Wotton
1550 5 Sept.	Sir William Cecil
1553 2 June	Sir John Cheke
1553 Aug.	Sir John Bourne
1557 30 Mar.	Sir John Boxall
1558 20 Nov.	Sir William Cecil
1572 13 July	Sir Thomas Smith
1573 21 Dec.	Sir Francis Walsingham
1577 12 Nov.	Dr Thomas Wilson
1586 30 Sept.	William Davison
[1590-96: no Principal Secretary]	
1596 5 July	Sir Robert Cecil
1600 10 May	John Herbert

FURTHER READING

- S. Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity: William Cecil and the British Succession Crisis, 1558-1569* (Cambridge, 1998), esp. ch. 1.
- G. R. Elton, ed., *The Tudor Constitution* (Cambridge, 1982) [esp. ch. 3].
- F. M. Greir Evans, *The Principal Secretary of State: A Survey from 1558 to 1680* (Manchester, 1923). [Dated but still useful].
- M. Taviner, 'Robert Beale and the Elizabethan Polity', PhD thesis, University of St Andrews (2000).

NOTES

[1] Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office, 3 vols. (London: HMSO, 1963-8), vol. 2, 1-3; Robert Lemon, ed. Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth 1547-1580 Preserved in the State Paper Department of Her Majesty's Public Record Office (London, 1856), vii-x.

[2] See www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/hmc_pubs.htm.

[3] M. Taviner, 'Robert Beale and the Elizabethan Polity', PhD thesis, University of St Andrews (2000), 104.

[4] G. R. Elton, ed., The Tudor Constitution (Cambridge, 1982), ch. 3.

[5] There is a surviving chest in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

[6] British Library, Additional MS 48149, ff. 3v-9v, printed in Conyers Read, Mr Secretary Walsingham and the Policy of Queen Elizabeth, (Oxford, 1925), vol. I, 423-43.

[7] Ibid, p. 425.

[8] Ibid, p. 437.

[9] BM MLA 1982, 7-1.

[10] Lord Burghley to Sir Robert Cecil, 7 Dec. 1593, Cambridge University Library, MS Ee.3.56, no. 14.

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