

A Diligent Professional Among the Noble Amateurs: the Fourth Earl of Rochford as Diplomat and Secretary of State, 1749-75

Dr Geoffrey W. Rice

University of Canterbury (New Zealand)

Various source media, State Papers Online

*perhaps this is the earliest
biography of him in existence*

11.
To The Queens Most Excellent Majesty
The Humble Petition of Daniel de Toe

That yo^r Petitioner wth a sincere design to Propogate The Interest of the
Prover Succession and to animate The people against The designs of The Pretenders
Always look'd on as an Enemy-to yo^r Maj^{ties} Sacred Person and Government did
the severall Pamphlets particularly One intituled Reasons against The Hannover
Succession, what if The Pretender should come, and Others
In all which books Altho' The Titles seem'd to look as if written in Favour of the
Prover and Sundry Expressions, as in all Ironical Writing it Must be, May be
understood Against the True Design of the whole, and turned to a Meaning quite different
from the Intention of the Author: yet yo^r Petitioner Humbly Assures yo^r Maj^{ties} in the
most plain Manner possible, That his True and Onely Design in all y^e said books, was by
an Ironical Discourse of recommending The Pretender, In the strongest and Most forcible
manner to expose his designs, and The ruinous consequences of his succeeding thereon.

...the Lord Arch-Bishop of St. Andrews.
His Grace the Lord Arch-Bishop of Glasgow.
The Marquis of Athol, Lord Privy Seal.
The Duke of Gordon.
The Earl of Errol.
The Earl of Marr.
The Earl of Caithness.
The Earl of Linlithgow, Lord Justice General.
The Earl of Drumfrevling.
The Earl of Strathmore.
The Earl of Southwick.
The Earl of Traquair.
The Earl of Belcarras.

...The Lord Viscount of Tarbat, Clerk of Register.
The Lord Strathnaver.
The Lord Treasurer-Depute.
The Lord Duffus.
The Lord Kinaird.
The Mr. of Balmerino.
The Lord President of the Session.
The Lord Advocate.
The Lord Justice Clerk.
The Lord Castlehill.
Lieutenant General Montro.
The Lord of Niddrie.

Whereas We have seen a Proclamation issued out in Name of His most Sacred Majesty
Declaring, that the Prince of Orange and his Adherents, have designed to Inva
His Majesties Kingdoms; and that now His Majesty hath signified by His Royal Let
ter of the Date at Whitehall the fifth day of November Instant, that they are Lan
ding in England, and in order thereunto, have Contrived and Framed several Treaso
nable Papers and Declarations, hoping thereby to Seduce and Corrupt His Majesties Subjects
and that several Persons are employed to disperse the same; and since
of His Majesties Privy C
cessary to Admonish all

mercy out of this world life, to one
... of north and more, Mary fall given
... and, which he had had to dispose
... only right time, by blood and sword
... free said Kingdom of England
... minor titles and rights, they sold in
... and, & some know ledges by this
... of peoples being natural, which
... beginning of the 17th day of this month
... our said dearest sister is parted from
... charge of all hands & duties of
... and see from the same time in
... to us, as to their only sovereign
... accord by their own proclamation
... of the same time in
... in our part

William Henry Nassau de Zuylestein (1717-81), fourth Earl of Rochford, was unusual among British diplomats of noble rank in the mid-eighteenth century. His family background was Anglo-Dutch (the Rochford earldom was a creation of William III after the Glorious Revolution), and he had estates in the Netherlands. After seven years at Eton College he had been educated at Geneva in the household of a prominent Calvinist pastor, making him fluent in French as well as Dutch. Rochford was an interesting individual. He was a musician who loved the theatre and counted the actor David Garrick and the playwright Beaumarchais among his closest friends. He fostered a craze for English country dances at the Court of Turin in the 1750s. His interest in plants and flowers led him on botanical expeditions in the Swiss Alps, and he is credited with the first introduction of the Lombardy poplar to southern England.^[1]

Rochford is also noteworthy as the only British Secretary of State in the difficult years 1763-79 who had been a career diplomat and ambassador. Rochford's experience as an ambassador informed all his work as Secretary of State, yet his career was mostly marked by frustration. These were exceptionally difficult years for British foreign policy, with no continental ally and the constant threat of a war of revenge from France and Spain, eager to recover their losses in the Seven Years' War.

On the evidence of the State Papers Foreign for Savoy-Sardinia 1749-55, Spain 1763-66, and France 1766-68, Rochford set out to be an exemplary ambassador for his king and country. As an ambitious young courtier to George II, but lacking wealth or connections, Rochford chose diplomacy as a more honourable path to high office than party politics, and was appointed to the

court of Turin in 1749.^[2] Savoy-Sardinia was then the most important of the Italian states for British foreign policy, but it was not an easy post for a novice diplomat, as France and Austria worked to counteract British influence with the widower king of Savoy, Charles-Emmanuel III. Rochford knew that gaining the king's private ear was essential, and he went to great lengths to make himself popular at Turin, even riding out to hunt with the king before breakfast.^[3]

Unlike some British diplomats of this period, Rochford took the trouble to keep himself informed by corresponding with fellow diplomats at other posts. He also cultivated British consuls as useful sources of information, a practice regarded as beneath the dignity of most peers.^[4] However, the evidence for these contacts comes from private correspondence rather than the State Papers.^[5] He also prepared thoroughly for his negotiations, reading complicated legal documents for a case involving English miners in Savoy,^[6] and the claims of Waldensian Protestants to British protection.^[7] He played a minor but useful role in the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Aranjuez (1752), though this had the long-term effect of reducing British influence in the region. His reports on military matters once included the dry remark that the king's soldiers parading in the Valentino Gardens might look more impressive when the infantry all wore the same uniform.^[8]

Rochford was recalled from Turin to replace the Earl of Albemarle as Groom of the Stole in March 1755, and resumed his role as a courtier. As Lord Lieutenant of Essex he spent the Seven Years' War exercising the Essex militia and lending his influence to Essex elections. When George II died in October 1760 Rochford yielded office with such good grace that he

won George III's favour and an Irish pension of £2,000 a year. He was still recovering from a serious illness in June 1763 when he was named ambassador to Spain.

Madrid was a key post for British foreign policy in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War. Spain had entered the Seven Years' War near its end and had suffered embarrassing defeats at Havana and Manila. A British sack of Manila was prevented on the promise of Archbishop Rojo of Manila that Spain would compensate them for the expected plunder. This was the so-called Manila Ransom, which the Spanish Government was determined not to pay.^[9] Rochford pressed for payment as hard as he could, and the French urged their Spanish ally to agree to instalments or a reduced amount in order to deprive Britain of a pretext for war, but the issue remained unresolved when Rochford left Madrid.

His first negotiation at Madrid concerned a dispute over British logwood-cutters in Honduras. Having satisfied himself that Britain had a good case in international law, Rochford took a strong line, threatening naval action if the cutters were not reinstated. Grenville's cabinet supported him, and this 'gun-boat diplomacy' succeeded, giving him a reputation as a tough anti-Bourbon.^[10] Rochford wrote over 400 despatches from Madrid, a veritable flood of information compared with those of his predecessors, and made 'Frequent applications ... for His Majesty's trading Subjects'.^[11]

A key part of Rochford's instructions for Madrid concerned naval intelligence. British ministers were anxious about Spanish rearmament and needed accurate assessments of naval strength. Rochford resumed his previous policy of cultivating the British consuls in his area, and they provided him with up-to-

date information, counting naval vessels in the ports and under construction.^[12] However, Rochford was able to reassure his masters that the quality and training of Spanish crews was very inferior to that of the Royal Navy. Rochford's figures for Spanish naval expansion were often more accurate than those sent to France's Chief Minister, the Duc de Choiseul, by the French ambassador. Rochford was willing to pay for information (though his funds were limited) and one source yielded timely warning of a French plot to fire the naval dockyard at Portsmouth, which was thwarted.

Having witnessed the Madrid Riots of 1766,^[13] Rochford was appointed to the Paris embassy in July 1766 and ordered there at once, without the customary home leave. Rochford insisted on taking the British consul at Madrid, Stanier Porten (uncle of the historian Edward Gibbon) with him as secretary of embassy, the start of a close friendship and working relationship which lasted until Rochford's retirement in 1775.

Rochford was now the dean of the British diplomatic service, and kept in touch with brother diplomats across Europe as well as ministers at home. He confronted the outstanding French foreign minister of the mid-eighteenth century, the duc de Choiseul, who was still smarting from France's defeat in the Seven Years' War. Rochford's spirited advocacy of British interests made Choiseul an implacable enemy. Yet Rochford's customary diligence prepared him so well for a complex dispute over Dunkirk that Choiseul was finally forced to concede. Rochford also resolved the lingering dispute over unpaid Canada Bills, with help from Porten.

Choiseul was largely responsible for Rochford's major embarrassments as British ambassador at Paris. In

1766 he ambushed Rochford by suggesting a trade-off between the Manila Ransom and Spain's complaints about the Falkland Islands. This negotiation was wrecked by the bungling of an inexperienced Secretary of State, Lord Shelburne, but Rochford got the blame for its failure.^[14] Much more serious was Choiseul's annexation of Corsica in 1768.^[15] Rochford had obtained a copy of the secret treaty, but the British government, distracted by riots in London, failed to take his warnings seriously. Rochford also had the misfortune to fall seriously ill for two weeks at the most critical phase of the crisis.^[16]

Feeling angry and betrayed, he returned to London to resign his embassy, but was persuaded to accept a cabinet post instead. This had been the height of his ambition, and he accepted with alacrity, being named Secretary of State for the Northern Department in October 1768. This appointment puzzled observers, for Rochford's diplomatic experience had all been in the Southern Department. Some saw it as deference to Choiseul, but in fact Thomas Thynne, Viscount Weymouth, had demanded the more important Southern secretaryship in the cabinet reshuffle.

Rochford threw himself into his new role with energy and enthusiasm. The State Papers show that he was particularly scrupulous in his conduct of the routine correspondence, insisting on regular reports and prompt replies. Some British diplomats had been left for months without fresh instructions. Rochford now kept them fully informed and morale rose accordingly. The historian, Hamish Scott, has credited Rochford with averting the impending shipwreck of British foreign policy under the Chatham administration with policies aimed at ending Britain's diplomatic isolation.^[17] Yet his pursuit of a Russian alliance through Goodricke at

Stockholm proved elusive, and he finally decided that a treaty was not worth the huge subsidy demanded by the Russian court. The historian of Swedish history, Michael Roberts, revised his former opinion of Rochford after researching this negotiation, concluding that he had been far more flexible and effective than his predecessors, and 'a good deal more realistic than Choiseul'.^[18]

Weymouth's drunkenness and neglect of his duties gave Rochford much extra work as Secretary of State, in both departments, making him at times the de facto 'foreign secretary'. As an experienced ambassador he was regarded by George III and Prime Minister, Lord North, as their foreign policy expert, and his advice was crucial to Britain's response in the Falklands Islands crisis of 1770.^[19] Rochford took charge, ordering a major naval armament while demanding disavowal and restitution from Spain. Weymouth resented this intrusion into his department and resigned. Rochford was appointed Southern Secretary to replace him, and his recall of Harris from Madrid kept up the pressure on Spain until the French king's sudden dismissal of his Chief Minister, Choiseul, deprived Spain of any prospect of French assistance. North's suggested 'secret promise' to evacuate the islands at some future date was a clumsy intervention by a politician who had no diplomatic experience, and came close to undermining Rochford's firm line. The Spanish declaration was signed only a few hours before Parliament assembled in January 1771. Even so, there were heated exchanges between Rochford and Masserano, the Spanish ambassador, over issues of restitution and disarmament, and war still seemed likely until April, when all sides disarmed simultaneously, as Rochford had suggested.^[20]

Opposition propaganda at the time painted this as a shabby deal, but recent research has shown that Rochford helped avert an unnecessary war and scored Britain's biggest diplomatic success since 1763. Historians have hitherto given all the credit to North's secret promise, or to French mediation, which Rochford had firmly rejected. The inside story of the Falklands Crisis has been found in foreign diplomatic archives; the State Papers are singularly unhelpful.^[21]

While the new Northern Secretary, Lord Suffolk, improved his French so that he could actually converse with the foreign diplomats in London, Rochford embarked on a new policy initiative, with the full support of George III. This was a secret negotiation with the new French foreign minister d'Aiguillon aimed at a diplomatic *rapprochement* between Britain and France. Rochford was the first British minister to recognise that the emergence of Russia and Prussia as major powers had shifted the balance of power in Europe, and that Britain should give up any lingering hope of reversing the Diplomatic Revolution of 1756. It made better sense for the maritime powers to guarantee each other's colonies and unite to maintain a balance of power against the emerging eastern powers. The first Partition of Poland in 1772 amply confirmed Rochford's analysis. Unfortunately, the Swedish Revolution that year ended his secret initiative with d'Aiguillon. This crisis brought Europe to the brink of war, and its peaceful resolution owed much to the firmness of British policy. Rochford wrote to a fellow cabinet minister in characteristic vein:

We are determined to let France know that we will not be bambouled; I hope we shall not shew our teeth without biting, though I believe it will not be necessary,

for I am sure if we are *firm and temperate* we may yet keep all quiet.^[22]

Rochford now continued with the other arm of his policy, which was to detach Spain from the Bourbon Family Compact by offering British friendship and cooperation overseas. His encouragement of Spanish ministers to take a more independent line, now that Choiseul's influence had gone, bore fruit after his departure from office. When France finally joined the American war in 1778 on the side of the rebellious colonists, Spain did not automatically follow suit. While there were other reasons, not least the recent conflict between Spain and Portugal in South America, Hamish Scott attributes this delay in part to Rochford's more conciliatory policies of the early 1770s.

The State Papers Foreign tell only part of the story of Rochford's Southern secretary-ship. Alongside an extensive correspondence with British diplomats in Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland, the Italian States and elsewhere, he was also responsible for Ireland, the East India Company and many domestic affairs, matters which took up a great deal of his time in the 1770s. His name appears on almost every page of volumes 3 and 4 of the massive *Calendar of Home Office Papers of the Reign of George III*.

Failing health and doubts about Britain's military response to American independence led to Rochford's retirement in October 1775. He had favoured a negotiated solution, but was outvoted in an increasingly bellicose cabinet. Rochford was soon forgotten as the American War worsened. His 'Plan for Peace in Europe', proposing reciprocal guarantees among the maritime powers, was ignored, but its strategic thinking reveals Rochford as perhaps the most

imaginative of British secretaries of state in the eighteenth century.

In his chosen profession Rochford had proven himself an exceptionally diligent and effective diplomat, outwitting his French counterpart at Madrid and earning the respect of colleagues for his stout opposition to Choiseul at Paris. Hamish Scott has shown that as Secretary of State Rochford achieved as much as anyone could reasonably expect in a period of unusually difficult circumstances for Britain. He had restored unity and direction to a foreign policy which had virtually collapsed in 1768, and had pursued the Russian alliance as far as it was realistic to do so. It might be argued that without Rochford's energy and experience British foreign policy might have suffered worse humiliations in the 1770s. The historian Nicholas Tracy has described Rochford as 'one of the stronger men of the period, ranking with Sandwich in his professionalism within his department'.^[23] Hamish Scott's judgement that Rochford was 'the ablest man to control foreign policy in the first decade of peace [after 1763], a statesman of intelligence, perception and considerable application', remains a fair assessment of this interesting and hitherto neglected British secretary of state.^[24]

NOTES

^[1] For further background, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 40, 260-3, and G. W. Rice, *The Life of the Fourth Earl of Rochford (1717-81), Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Dutch Courtier, Diplomat and Statesman* (Lewiston NY, 2010).

^[2] SP 92/58 f.171, Rochford to Bedford, 6/17 September 1749.

^[3] G. W. Rice, 'Lord Rochford at Turin, 1749-55', in *Knights Errant and True Englishmen*, ed. Jeremy Black (1989), 92-112.

^[4] G. W. Rice, 'British Consuls and Diplomats in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: An Italian Example', *English Historical Review*, 92 (1977), 834-46.

^[5] G. W. Rice, 'Archival Sources for the life and career of the fourth Earl of Rochford (1717-81), British diplomat and statesman', *Archives*, 88 (1992), 254-68.

^[6] SP 92/58 f.175, Rochford to Bedford, 13/24 September 1749.

^[7] SP 92/61 f.13, Rochford to Holderness, 6 January 1753.

^[8] SP 92/62 ff. 19 & 23, Rochford to Holderness, 2 & 13 March 1754.

^[9] SP 94/165 f.203, Rochford to Halifax, 12 December 1763.

^[10] N. Tracy, 'The Gunboat Diplomacy of the Government of George Grenville, 1764-65: The Honduras, Turks' Island and Gambian Incidents', *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 711-31.

^[11] SP 94/172 f. 58, Rochford to Conway, 21 October 1765.

^[12] SP 94/170 f.47, 'State of the Arsenal at Carthage and a List of the Squadron fitting out there', in Consul Bomeester to Halifax, 18 March 1765.

^[13] SP 94/173 f.191, Rochford to Conway, 24 March 1766.

^[14] G. W. Rice, 'Great Britain, the Manila Ransom, and the first Falkland Islands dispute with Spain, 1766', *International History Review*, v.2, no.3 (July, 1980), 386-409

^[15] SP 78/275 f.43, Rochford to Shelburne, 26 May 1768.

^[16] G. W. Rice, 'Deceit and Distraction: Britain, France and the Corsican Crisis of 1768', *International History Review*, v.28, no.2 (June, 2006), 287-315.

^[17] Hamish Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* Clarendon, (Oxford, 1990), pp. 125-6.

^[18] Michael Roberts, *British Diplomacy and Swedish Politics, 1758-1773* (London, 1980), pp. 238-9.

^[19] SP 94/184 f.175, Captain Braithwaite to Mr Stephens, 14 August 1770.

^[20] SP 94/186 f.147, Rochford to Harris, 23 April 1771.

^[21] G. W. Rice, 'British Foreign Policy and the Falkland Islands Crisis of 1770-71', *International History Review*, v.32, no.2 (June 2010), 273-305.

^[22] PRO 30/29/1/14, Rochford to Gower, 10 October 1772.

^[23] Nicholas Tracy, *Navies, Deterrence, and American Independence: Britain and Seapower in the 1760s and 1770s*(Vancouver, 1988), p. 43.

^[24] Hamish Scott, 'Anglo-Austrian Relations after the Seven Years' War: Lord Stormont at Vienna, 1763-1772', PhD dissertation, (University of London, 1977), p. 9.

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