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England and the Stuart Papers

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Bonnie Prince Charlie Entering the Ballroom at Holyroodhouse before 30 Apr 1892. Royal Collection Trust/ ©Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018



From their first public discovery in the early nineteenth century, the Stuart Papers were valued mainly for what they might reveal about English politicians who secretly conspired with the exiled Stuart court. These revelations turned out to be less sensational than had been hoped, or feared. Gradually, the Stuart Papers have been recognized as providing a much more interesting insight: an external perspective on the instability of eighteenth-century English politics.

A thirst for the secrets of the Stuart Papers began in the 1760s, after the decline of Jacobitism. The English opposition press became convinced that 'Tory' supporters of King George III were heirs to the odious Jacobites. 'Shew me a Tory', fumed John Wilkes, 'and I will shew you a Jacobite.'^[1] The hidden correspondence of the Stuarts might prove the undoing of 'Tories' like Wilkes's nemesis Lord Chief Justice Mansfield - who had in fact written a youthful letter declaring his loyalty to the exiled King^[2]. To counter these radical attacks, the Scots writer James Macpherson published a *History of Great Britain* that uncovered the 'secret intrigues', not of the Tories, but of their enemies, the Whigs. In what he called the 'Stuart-Papers', meaning those of the Jacobite Undersecretary of State David Nairne, Macpherson found letters of the 1690s that implicated John Churchill, Earl (later Duke) of Marlborough, Admiral Edward Russell (later Earl of Orford), Charles Talbot, Earl (later Duke) of Shrewsbury, and Robert Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, in plotting with the exiled King James II and VII. The last three were Whig politicians, and Marlborough was a Whig hero.^[3]

The main body of Stuart Papers, kept at Rome by James 'III and VIII', Charles Edward Stuart and his brother Henry Benedict (Cardinal York), promised to bring further political scandals to light, but they

remained in the family's hands until the Napoleonic Wars. The Whigs still hoped they might provide ammunition against their Tory enemies. The negotiation that led to the purchase of the first batch of them from the Abbé James Waters at Rome in 1804-5 was initiated by the Opposition M.P. Sir John Coxe Hippisley, acting with the support of the Whig leader Charles James Fox. Fox was then preparing a hostile biography of James II and VII, and sought material damaging to the 'Tory principles' that had reappeared in George III's governments. The most important document to emerge, however, was a Life of James II that gave further evidence of the collusion of Marlborough and Russell with the Stuart court. This was not the scandal that the Whigs were seeking^[4].

They had already been offered a bigger cache of papers by the mysterious Dr. Robert Watson, a Scottish radical who had fled to France during the Revolutionary Wars. Watson had obtained the documents in Rome from Cardinal York's executor, and offered them in 1815 to Henry Brougham, the Whig lawyer and politician. Brougham tried unsuccessfully to keep the papers out of the hands of the despised Prince Regent (the future George IV), accusing him of wanting to purge them of anything displaying 'Royal turpitude.' Dr. Watson was unmoved; the Prince's money meant more to him than anti-Tory solidarity. He was only thwarted when Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, the Papal Secretary of State, hearing that Watson had been showing off the papers to English tourists, confiscated them. Consalvi immediately approached the British government in order to negotiate their sale to the Prince Regent.^[5]

Now safely in government hands, the Stuart Papers arrived in England in summer 1817, and were examined from 1819 to 1829 by a board of slow-moving, well-

connected Commissioners led by the Tory M.P. John Wilson Croker. By 1826, Croker was able to note, no doubt with relief that, 'comparatively speaking, few English men [were] attached to the Stuart cause.' It has been rumored ever since that letters incriminating English politicians were removed from the collection by the Commissioners. This was believed even by Sir Walter Scott, custodian of the Stuart Papers after 1829, but no firm evidence suggests that this was in fact the case. For example, a letter from Edward Howard, Duke of Norfolk, to James 'III and VIII', mentioned by Croker, was later thought to be missing from the Stuart Papers. In fact, it is still there, dated June 13, 1720^[6].

Because they had supposedly been tampered with, because they were full of unreliable 'calumnies', or because they pertained mostly to Scottish and Irish affairs, few English historians consulted the Stuart Papers. By 1939, only 20 writers had cited them in print, including a single prominent English scholar, Philip Henry Stanhope, Lord Mahon.^[7] Amazingly, even the seven volumes of calendars published by the Historical Manuscripts Commission after 1902 did not attract much attention from English historians.

Those who turned their backs on the Stuart Papers overlooked their real value. They chronicled English political developments from a unique, external viewpoint, testifying to inherent insecurities, openness to outside forces and broad-based partisanship. By 1714, overtures to 'great men' by the Stuart court were outdated. Slowly, the Jacobites realized that no general or admiral or peer of the realm, no matter how influential, was likely to do them much good without the aid of a major political party - either the Whigs or the Tories. Although the landed elite still held most government offices, their power now depended on

organized political groups that drew popular support and could be influenced from abroad. The Stuart court became a somewhat reluctant dependent of one of the parties, the Tories. This did not mean every Tory was a Jacobite, or every Jacobite a Tory. Jacobitism was to Toryism what leaving the European Union was to Conservatism before the Brexit referendum: the ill-defined aspiration of a powerful sub-group that could mobilize public opinion but was constantly thwarted by party leaders.

For his part, the Stuart claimant could not hope to make any impact on English politics without aligning himself with the Tory party. It was a difficult alliance. Tories upheld the authority of the monarch and the Church of England while criticizing the 'corruption' and 'despotism' of government ministers. The Stuart court was pleased with their monarchical principles, but it favored toleration over the rights of the Church and was not particularly inclined to reform. The Catholic gentry - Scottish and Irish as well as English - who held offices under the Stuarts at Saint Germain-en-Laye and Rome often mistrusted the motives of English High Churchmen. They longed to win Whigs over to their cause in order to free themselves from bondage to one party. With the exception of renegades like Philip Wharton, Marquis (later Duke) of Wharton or the London alderman George Heathcote, they were unsuccessful^[8].

The dependency of Jacobitism on Toryism was slow in developing. A segment of the Tory party had been repulsed by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which removed the 'rightful' monarch, legitimized limited toleration, initiated a series of wars and offered power to the hated Whigs. The 'Country' or opposition group within the Tory party moved steadily towards

Jacobitism in the 1690s, a trend that continued under Queen Anne.^[9] From 1710 to 1714, leading figures in the Tory administration, notably Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, and Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, entered into contact with the Stuart court in order to shore up support within their own party. When George I threw the Tories out of office after his accession in 1714, the party chiefs hatched a poorly conceived plot for a Stuart restoration, which led to anti-government riots. The failed rebellion of 1715 in Scotland and northern England showed Jacobitism's organizational weaknesses, but did not tarnish its attraction as an alternative to Whig rule. Bolingbroke briefly became Secretary of State to James 'III and VIII', before leaving his service in frustration. Oxford conspired incessantly with the exiled court, while James Butler, Duke of Ormonde, former Captain-General of British forces, became a life-long Jacobite^[10]. In 1721 Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, the most energetic Tory leader remaining in England, was the central figure in a labyrinthine conspiracy involving planned uprisings by Tory crowds in London as well as an invasion by Spanish troops under Ormonde's command^[11]. Atterbury was arrested by the British government and exiled.^[12]

After this shattering experience, the Tories were bereft of charismatic leadership and entered into a series of 'Country' alliances with opposition Whigs. The next serious Tory approach to the Stuarts was made in 1731-3 by Henry Hyde, Lord Cornbury, who tried to negotiate French military support for a rising but broke off relations with James 'III and VIII' after being accused of acting with the arch-traitor Bolingbroke^[13]. Between 1740 and 1744, Stuart agents recruited Tory politicians - Sir John Hynde Cotton, Sir Watkin Williams Wynne and James Barry, Earl of Barrymore - who were

expected to assist a French landing in Essex^[14]. When the landing plans failed in January 1744, several of the feckless conspirators joined a short-lived Broad Bottom administration of Whigs and Tories. They were no doubt highly alarmed when Prince Charles Edward Stuart landed in Scotland and marched a small Scottish army into the heart of England. None of them came out to greet him, prompting the disgruntled Highland chiefs to compel Charles to withdraw to Scotland, where he was defeated at Culloden in April 1746.^[15] Four years later, on a secret trip to London, Charles met with a group of Tory politicians, headed by Charles Noel Somerset, Duke of Beaufort, and John Fane, Earl of Westmoreland. They persuaded him not to attempt a coup in the capital, where the growth of a popular opposition club, the Independent Electors of Westminster, had given him hopes of staging an insurrection^[16]. The Tories drifted away from the Stuarts thereafter. By 1761, it was reported that even the arch-Tory Sir John Phillips was avoiding contact with Jacobite agents^[17]. His party had become a rump of disgruntled backbench M.P.s. Ironically, its name was soon to be attached by Whigs to the ministerial supporters of George III.

Contrary to what many historians have claimed, the Stuart court was seldom naïve or credulous in dealing with Tory politicians. Some, like George Granville, Lord Lansdowne, John Boyle, Earl of Orrery, or Alderman John Barber, wrote to James III directly, but this was dangerous, and most preferred intermediaries^[18]. The best Jacobite agents carefully recorded the wavering and hesitation of their political contacts, along with gushing statements of loyalty. Except in the crisis of December 1745, the Stuarts never expected much from the Tories in terms of military support - the French,

Spanish or Swedes, backed by Highland clans, had to provide that. What the Tories could deliver was popular enthusiasm, often in the form of riots or demonstrations. In the spring and summer of 1715, plebeian adherents of the party fomented public disorders in dozens of English towns.^[19] Riots and demonstrations diverted troops from the coasts, unsettling the Hanoverian government and sapping its claim to public approval. Jacobite agents focused intensely on signs of disaffection among crowds, one of them writing over-enthusiastically after James 'III and VIII's birthday in June 1716 that, 'the whole nation through all the towns yesterday distinguished themselves with white roses, especially where they were not dragooned'^[20].

Tory readers also comprised the audience for Jacobite publicity - pamphlets, broadsides, cartoons and newspapers. In May 1717, the London publicist George Flint sent the Stuart court a list of Tories in London, York and Newcastle to whom Jacobite writings could be sent^[21]. Nathaniel Mist, publisher of the popular Tory newspaper *Mist's Weekly Journal*, became a regular correspondent of the Stuart court after he went into exile in 1728. He commented mainly on political affairs in Parliament and the City of London, especially in connection with the 1733 Excise Crisis^[22]. In 1736-7, Mist gave advice on the funding of a new London newspaper, *Common Sense*^[23], edited by his friend Charles Molloy. James 'III and VIII' himself solicited financial contributions to the paper from his friends in England^[24]. As late as 1750, the acquittal of an anti-Hanoverian pamphleteer who was tried near London for seditious words was greeted with immense satisfaction within Jacobite circles^[25].

The Stuart Papers present contemporary English politics as fast-changing, open to influences from other parts of Europe, deeply affected by popular opinion and animated by a ferociously partisan press. While English Jacobite publications remained obsessed with long-standing dynastic, religious and constitutional issues, individual actors shifted their positions dramatically within a polarized context.^[26] As in the period before 1688, English politics could be dangerous and life-threatening. It was far from tamed or regularized by party organization. A simmering national turbulence was occasionally brought to the boil by Jacobite efforts.

Later observers sought to find in the Stuart Papers the hidden origins of their own troubles and polarities. Instead, they found further complexities and contradictions. Seven decades of gnawing domestic uncertainty, faction, betrayal and conspiracy had delayed the construction of a unifying national ideology. The eventual triumph of an imagined Britain, confident, expansive and imperial, built on Protestantism, liberty and property, came after 1760. The revelation of a deeply unstable era turned out to be the main secret of the Stuart Papers.

NOTES

^[1] [John Wilkes] *The North Briton* (2 vols, London, 1776), no. 33, Jan. 15, 1763, p. 187.

^[2] RA SP/Main/85/21.

^[3] James Macpherson, *Original Papers; Containing the Secret History of Great Britain, from the Restoration to the Accession of the House of Hanover* (2 vols, London, 1775), i. 457-9, 475, 479-88. Whig plotting with James II was first made public in Sir John Dalrymple, *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland* (3 vols., London, 1771).

^[4] F. H. Blackburne Daniell (ed), *Calendar of the Stuart Papers belonging to His Majesty the King, preserved at Windsor Castle*, Vol. 1: 1579-Feb 1716, (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1902) v-viii; J. S. Clarke, *The Life of James the Second, King of England, &c, Collected out of Memoirs Writ of His Own Hand* (2 vols, London, 1816), ii. 522-3. RA SP/M/1-4.

^[5] HMC Stuart, i. iv-xiv; Alistair Tayler, *The Stuart Papers at Windsor* (London, 1939), pp. 9-31; Dominic Green, 'From Jacobite to Jacobin: Robert Watson's Life in Opposition', in Allan I. MacInnes, Kieran German and Leslie Graham (eds), *Living with Jacobitism, 1690-1788: The Three Kingdoms and Beyond* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 185-96. See also National Archives, Foreign Office 42/16, 'Stuart Papers, 1817-1830.'

^[6] HMC Stuart, i. xiv-xxi; Tayler, *Stuart Papers at Windsor*, pp. 31-6. RA SP/Main/47/79.

^[7] Tayler, *Stuart Papers at Windsor*, p. 37; Philip Stanhope, Viscount Mahon, *The History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, 1713-1783* (7 vols., London, 1836-53).

^[8] HMC Stuart, iii. 225, 312; RA SP/Main/296/24.

^[9] Paul Monod, 'Jacobitism and Country Principles in the Reign of William III', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987) 289-310; Daniel Szechi, *Jacobitism and Tory Politics, 1710-1714* (Edinburgh, 1984).

^[10] Daniel Szechi, *1715: The Great Jacobite Rebellion* (London, 2006); HMC Stuart, i. 377, 441; RA SP/Main/4/107 and 5/51 (first letters from Bolingbroke and Ormonde); iv. 60, RA SP Main/12/7 (first letter written by Oxford).

^[11] RA SP/Main/53/48.

^[12] Eveline Cruickshanks and Howard Erskine-Hill, *The Atterbury Plot* (Basingstoke, 2006); John Hulbert Glover, *Letters of Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, to the Chevalier de St. George and Some of the Adherents of the House of Stuart* (London, 1847).

^[13] Eveline Cruickshanks, 'Hyde, Henry, Viscount Cornbury', in Romney Sedgwick (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1715-54* (2 vols., London, 1970), ii. 164-5; RA SP/Main/162/124, 165; 163/156; 164/194; 183/131. For a different interpretation, see Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714-60* (Cambridge, 1982).

^[14] RA SP/Main/221/107.

^[15] Eveline Cruickshanks, *Political Untouchables: The Tories and the '45* (London, 1979); RA SP/Main/221/107, 109; 222/128, 141; 223/67, 124; 231/110; 248/151, 182; 251/127; 253/51-2; 256/69; 257/55, 169; 260/6, 107, 110; 261/54; 268/5; 269/109; 270/47, 87, 105.

^[16] Doron Zimmermann, *The Jacobite Movement in Scotland and in Exile, 1746-1759* (Basingstoke, 2003); RA SP/Main/310/116- 17; Lord Mahon, *The Decline of the Last Stuarts: Extracts from the Despatches of British Envoys to the Secretary of State* (London, 1843), p. 76; Henry Paton (ed.), *The Lyon in Mourning* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1895-6), ii. 282-3.

^[17] RA SP/Main/405/75.

^[18] RA SP/Main/46/66 (Lansdowne), 93; 49/69 (Orrery); 134/145 (Barber).

^[19] Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688-1788* (Cambridge, 1989), chs. 6-8; but see Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), ch. 1.

^[20] HMC Stuart, ii. 227; RA SP/Main/8/143.

^[21] HMC Stuart, v. 543; RA SP/Main/19/53.

^[22] RA SP/Main/120/20; 130/5; 136/61; 137/68; 138/172; 142/141, 142; 157/183; 158/75, 120; 163/183; 169/44; 176/78; 181/69.

^[23] *Common Sense or The Englishman's Journal* (London, England), Saturday, February 5, 1737; Issue 1. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*.

^[24] RA SP/Main/189/88; 190/12; 193/97.

^[25] RA SP/Main/312/159.

^[26] See Daniel Szechi, *The Jacobites: Britain and Europe, 1688-1788* (Manchester, 1994).

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