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# The Stuart Papers: An Overview of their Subject Matter and Value for Researchers

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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



One of the key features of the emergence of the modern state has been the bureaucratisation of government. Simply put, since ca. 1400 the exercise of power through the written word has progressively become more and more normative and the key institutional structures (archives and record-keeping) that underpin this process have become increasingly central to the authority of princes and their ministers. Knowledge is a key aspect of power, and the state's archives gave its controllers an unmatched institutional memory. The Stuart Papers are a product of this crucial shift towards modernity. Technically speaking, they are the archive of the government-in-exile created and commanded by the main (Catholic) line of the Stuart dynasty after 1688, when James II and VII fled to France. The major part of the Stuart Papers is correspondingly composed of a huge and diverse aggregation of the correspondence, memorandums, accounts, warrants and other paperwork generated by the exiled Stuarts and their ministers between 1688 and 1807. But rulers are always in conversation with the ruled. Hence the other major component of the Stuart Papers consists of letters, proposals, petitions and so on, stemming from the Stuarts' erstwhile subjects in the British Isles (the 'Jacobites') and the Jacobite diaspora in Europe and the wider world.

The range of material the Stuarts' distant exercise of power produced is thus, in a sense, typical of the new model bureaucratic European states. If we take the political correspondence in the Stuart Papers as a case in point, a very wide spectrum of documents have survived. There are hundreds of letters between the exiled Stuart monarchs and their peers in Europe. James III and VIII (the son of James II and VII, a.k.a. the 'Old Pretender') at various times wrote both personally

and officially to Louis XIV and Louis XV of France<sup>[1]</sup>, Philip V and Charles III of Spain<sup>[2]</sup>, Peter I and Anna I of Russia<sup>[3]</sup>, every single reigning pope, Charles XII of Sweden and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, to name only the most prominent European princes in the first half of his reign (1701-66). Though some, such as Charles XII and Charles VI, carefully wrote back only via their ministers (thus maintaining a discreet distance and diplomatic 'plausible deniability'), most communicated directly with James on a monarch-to-monarch basis (in the process implicitly recognising him as a legitimate member of the princes' club)<sup>[4]</sup>. Even more numerous are the letters written on behalf of James's shadow- government to the monarchial favourites, ministers and senior courtiers of virtually every state in Europe, and replies and further correspondence from them regarding the exiled Stuarts and their cause.

This top-level communication was fundamentally driven by European great power politics. The Stuarts needed substantial material support in the form of men, ships, arms and money to retrieve their lost kingdoms<sup>[5]</sup>. For their part, the great powers of Europe, however sympathetic they might be on a personal level to a kindred dynasty fallen on hard times, easily appreciated what a useful tool the Jacobite underground in Britain might be if they went to war against the new order in the British Isles. The English, Irish and Scots were also famously politically volatile in terms of their allegiances. Who knew when another revolution would break out amongst them? It was perfectly possible that the Stuarts might be restored by their own peoples, as were the Yorkists, Lancastrians and Tudors, to say nothing of the Stuarts themselves in 1660, and from a European great power perspective it

would be very useful if James III and VIII or Charles 'III', reigning in London, could be reminded of old favours and kindnesses done by a fellow-monarch during his sojourn abroad.

The fact that the Stuarts created a bona-fide royal court and solemnly conducted themselves as contemporary monarchs with all the aplomb their financial and social circumstances would allow was a key component of their credibility with the European great powers. Just as crucial, however, was the fact that the exiled dynasty was supported by a deep-rooted and regionally powerful underground movement within the British Isles. Secret networks of Jacobites developed in England and Scotland after 1688 and in Ireland after 1691. Individuals and groups within these networks were in constant communication with the exiled court. Letters pledging fidelity, intelligence reports, memorandums on potential opportunities, plans for risings and so on, are the core of the political correspondence to be found in the Stuart Papers. Evidence that they had substantive support among powerful noblemen and others in some regions of the British Isles was important for establishing the Stuarts' credentials with potential allies among the great powers because it allowed the government-in-exile credibly to promise that a French, or Swedish, or Spanish, or Russian etc., invasion would be joined by thousands of Jacobite recruits led by the local elite. The memorandums and projects proposing various plans for risings to be coordinated with foreign invasions generated by the networks of Jacobites in the three kingdoms discussing amongst themselves how best to achieve their ends provided further evidence that there was support for a Stuart restoration, but also - just as importantly - could be used to demonstrate the

seriousness of the English, Irish and Scots Jacobites' commitment. The intelligence of all kinds from London and the provinces supplied by their supporters, suitably digested and summarised by the Jacobite court, also enabled the exiled Stuarts to offer their allies something tangible in the interim.

Pledges, intelligence and plans, however, were only part of the conversation between the exiled dynasty and the Jacobite movement. Each kingdom's Jacobites had their own agenda. The Jacobites were not simply undifferentiated, naive loyalists. The English, Irish and Scots elements each wanted profound political changes to follow on a restoration, not just in terms of personnel at the top of government, but also in the constitutions of the three kingdoms and the kingdoms' relationships with each other. Their views on these subjects were expressed in general in their correspondence with the government-in-exile and sometimes in more specific forms when they spelled out exactly what they expected the Stuarts to concede in terms of power and control in the event of a restoration. The correspondence between the exiled dynasty and its adherents is thus in many ways an ongoing negotiation, designed to produce an agreed objective above and beyond the reinstallation of the Stuarts in London.

The upshot is that the Stuart Papers is without doubt one of the most valuable archives to have survived from the early modern era. The Jacobite movement's resilience and longevity made it unique in the eighteenth century and one of only a handful of organisations to survive over any similar period of time since 1688. Between 1688 and 1789 every other major rising against a European state was either a relatively brief and spontaneous one-off event like the Camisard revolt in France or the Pugachev rebellion in Russia, or,

if it did stem from more deep-rooted organisation and planning, as was the case with Hetman Ivan Mazeppa's Cossack rising in the Ukraine and Prince Ferenc Rákóczi's rebellion in Hungary, withered and died after the rebels were driven into exile. Despite catastrophic defeats the Jacobites endured and continued to pose a threat to the Whig regime for over seventy years. And the secret of how they kept going for so long is encapsulated in the documents preserved in the Stuart Papers.

In France, Lorraine, Avignon and Rome the Stuart court established and re-established itself as a functioning bureaucracy, conducting diplomacy, accumulating funds and managing the Jacobite underground in the three kingdoms<sup>[6]</sup>. It established, as best it could, secure conduits for the movement of correspondence, laid the groundwork for the next rising, and otherwise kept the organisation ticking over in the long intervals between its attempts to overthrow the new order. Through these conduits, the Stuart court supplied the Jacobites in the British Isles with propaganda, memorabilia and personal encouragement and in return received secret affirmations of loyalty, military proposals and political information of all kinds<sup>[7]</sup>. From the early 1700s the court maintained salaried agents such as John Menzies and Harry Straton in key centres such as London and Edinburgh, and covertly subsidised newspapers and other publications that directly or indirectly supported the Jacobite cause. Through these agents, the Jacobite court delivered instructions to putative conspirators and directed Jacobite M.P.s and peers regarding the political positions it wanted them to take to facilitate its policies<sup>[8]</sup>. Within the Stuart Papers there is, then, a direct insight into the workings of an early modern

underground organisation over a long period of time. There is nothing else like them.

The documents also offer a direct insight into the darker side of eighteenth-century British politics. The political information the Jacobite underground delivered to the Stuart court was designed to give them as full a picture as possible of what was going on in the British Isles. And political dirt was a key part of this picture. The exiled government had, by and large, to operate and negotiate completely pragmatically. It could not afford to be squeamish about dealing with rapists, murderers, wastrels and thieves; all were grist to its mill. Hence the archive contains correspondence with, and insights into, some of the most unsavoury characters in eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland. To take only two examples, Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat<sup>[9]</sup>, bravely ended his career with a ringing speech on the scaffold in which he declared, 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' ('sweet and seemly it is to die for one's country'), but he began it by kidnapping and raping Lady Amelia Murray. Colonel William Cecil first came to public attention when he murdered his landlord, but by the 1730s was the Jacobite court's principal agent in London<sup>[10]</sup>. Just as interesting is the range of contacts to be found in the archive. The period 1688 to 1766 was one of political uncertainty. No-one could be certain that the Stuarts would not one day be restored. Many politicians accordingly tried to reinsure their careers by occasionally dabbling in Jacobitism. John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough and the most outstanding military commander in British history, did so almost on an annual basis. As a young Scotsman on the make in London William Murray, later Earl of Mansfield and the judge in the famous Somerset decision outlawing slavery in the British Isles, wrote to the Stuart court to

pledge his allegiance in 1725<sup>[11]</sup>. What was going on in such cases? Were such contacts ever sincere? Whatever conclusion a historian might draw, s/he must take into account the evidence in the Stuart papers.

The archive also offers insights into the characters and mindsets of two of the most significant actors in eighteenth-century English, Irish and Scots history. Leaving aside the plethora of other significant politicians whose analysis, thoughts and ideas can be found throughout the Stuart papers, the archive offers a unique insight into two men who profoundly influenced the course of events in the British Isles: James III and VIII and Charles 'III'. In both cases, we can glimpse all three stages of a monarch's life: the making of the man; the maturing ruler; and the final decline. Because they were regarded as true kings (though in Charles's case by none of the European great powers and only a dwindling remnant of faithful Jacobites) the records they left regarding their everyday lives, their thoughts and dreams are very full and reveal them in fine - sometimes cruel - detail. James the young king, full of fire and energy, yet uncompromisingly moral and deeply religious<sup>[12]</sup>. James the mature king, now cautious, more careful and pragmatic, but still pious to a fault, albeit with a profound commitment to religious toleration<sup>[13]</sup>. James the old king, all too aware that his time and his cause are past, yet solemnly maintaining his dignity and the decencies at his court. The same stages are apparent in the life of his oldest son, Charles, but with a darker, more bitter aspect. Charles the prince witnessing the breakdown of his parents' marriage and his mother, Queen Clementina Sobieska's, descent into religious mania and death. Charles the bold, charming adventurer, flinging himself into Scotland and demanding the Jacobites live up to

their pledges<sup>[14]</sup>. Charles the angry fugitive in Scotland and then on the Continent, plotting and scheming to make the '45 come again and increasingly drowning his frustration in brandy<sup>[15]</sup>). Charles the unrecognised, abandoned king, habitually drunk by midday and with a nasty propensity for beating his wife, Louise von Stolberg<sup>[16]</sup>. Two royal lives amounting to a tragedy of dramatic proportions can be followed from beginning to end.

Ultimately perhaps the most valuable (and perhaps the most peculiar) feature of the Stuart Papers is that in them we can hear the voices of the excluded. History, it is often said, is written by the winners, and the Jacobites certainly lost. Yet every historian knows that the more perspectives we can get on historical events the better we understand them. After a century and a half of diligent analysis by generations of historians we know and understand a great deal about the way conventional, 'normal' politics and society worked in Britain and Ireland. The Stuart Papers implicitly challenge the orthodoxy that has arisen from that understanding. By utilising them we can hear the voices of Irish Catholics, Scots Highlanders and English Tories, to name just three groups of the excluded. The Whig regime was not a consensual phenomenon; a great many groups and individuals were discriminated against and alienated by it. The Stuart Papers are one of a very few archives of dissent.

History is in constant need of correction. Unless we regularly reappraise and revise the past historians are always in danger of becoming spin doctors for the present. And through the Stuart Papers we can above all else see the way not taken. By comprehending the alternatives available at the time, and listening to the voices of those who challenged the contemporary

order, we gain a far richer understanding of the beginnings of the modern British nation state and how we got here from there.

## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> James Francis Edward Stuart to King of France Louis XV, 7 March 1725. RA SP/Main/80/123.

<sup>[2]</sup> James Francis Edward Stuart to King of Spain Charles III, 7 March 1729. RA SP/Main/125/125.

<sup>[3]</sup> James Francis Edward Stuart to Peter the Great, 20 February 1725. RA SP Main/80/66.

<sup>[4]</sup> King of Spain Charles III to James Francis Edward Stuart, 6 October 1759. RA SP/Main/395/161.

<sup>[5]</sup> RA SP/Main/17/22.

<sup>[6]</sup> RA SP/M/20/15.

<sup>[7]</sup> Mr J Hamilton to James Francis Edward Stuart, 3 August 1722, London. RA SP/Main/61/75.

<sup>[8]</sup> Memorandum, 26 January 1731. RA SP/Main/142/72.

<sup>[9]</sup> James Francis Edward Stuart to Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, 14 June 1725. RA SP/Main/82/142.

<sup>[10]</sup> RA SP/Main/96/17.

<sup>[11]</sup> RA SP/Main/85/21.

<sup>[12]</sup> James to Pope Clement XI, 30 May 1705. RA SP/M/16/29.

<sup>[13]</sup> James to Prince Charles Edward, 3 February 1747. RA SP/Main/281/34.

<sup>[14]</sup> Charles Edward Stuart to John Gordon, Laird of Glenbucket, 14 August 1745. RA CP/Main/4/316.

<sup>[15]</sup> Dr Thomas Meighan, account of Charles' arrest in Paris, 23 December 1748. RA SP/Main/295/163.

<sup>[16]</sup> RA SP/Box/3/1/129.

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