

Historical Reference

By Aram Bakshian Jr.

WASHINGTON—History is full of echoes, parallels and forebodings to make very good escape reading. There I was, snuggled comfortably with a memoir of the Restoration era, when out leapt a curiously timely scandal/conspiracy that nearly toppled the English system of government in the seething seventies—the 1670's, that is.

Nearly 300 years b.w. (before Watergate), a scandal broke that implicated—in most cases falsely—many of Charles 2d's closest advisers. Men, good men for the most part, were hounded out of public life, ruined, imprisoned and sent to the scaffold. Before the hysteria had run its course, the political opposition even attempted to use the scandal as a lever to topple an able leader it hated and envied, Charles himself.

The poet Dryden followed the long and tortured course of the "Popish Plot" with the interest only a contemporary columnist or writer of comedies (in his case the latter) could. His verdict? "Some truth there was but lashed and brewed with lies." Dryden recognized that, at bottom, truth was only a secondary consideration in the minds of Charles' rabid enemies. What might have been a contest between justice and injustice inevitably degenerated into a raw struggle for power:

Plots, true or false, are necessary things,

To raise up commonwealths and ruin kings.

The cloud burst over England during an uncomfortably warm London summer when an eccentric turncoat, one Titus Oates, announced the existence of "a most damnable plot" by the Catholic minority to seize control of England and massacre, or at least suppress, the Protestant majority. Like most informers, "Doctor Oates," as he styled himself, was a rather suspect character. A former British Navy chaplain, he had been cashiered for sodomy; proceeded to turn Catholic; was taken in at the Jesuit College in St. Omer in France; returned to England; underwent another convenient crisis of conscience; reverted to Protestantism; and then denounced his Jesuit benefactors—and dozens of other innocents he had never even met—with perjured testimony.

Never one to blush at dropping names, Oates libelously accused the Queen, the Duke of York, numerous civil servants and courtiers, a royal physician and various members of the nobility. The harebrained activities and subsequent arrest of one Coleman, York's former secretary (a bumbling, zealous little man who had corresponded on his own initiative with Catholic leaders across the Channel) provided just enough real material to keep all of the false rumors and conjecture alive.



The extreme Whigs, led by the ulcerous and unscrupulous Lord Shaftesbury, exploited the ensuing panic to attack the King and his counsellors. Some royal confidants were sent to the Tower and at least one, Lord Clifford, is said to have been driven to suicide. The London pamphleteers fed the flames of speculation, printing every unchecked rumor that Oates, Shaftesbury and assorted other rogues, lunatics and opportunists chose to float.

"If I should write you all the news and malicious stories that are told," the Duke of York informed his son-in-law in Holland, "instead of a letter you should have a volume from me." Parliament was stampeded, juries intimidated, and innocent men sent to the block. Only the slanderers were acquitted. Some people were even willing to believe the worst about the King while others feared that the scandal had left fatal wounds on society and might drive Charles from power. "I much fear," Henry Prideaux wrote, "that this business at last will appear very foul and render us odious and contemptible through all Europe."

Trials and investigations dragged on for years and nearly everyone but the King himself lost hope. "Let the law take its course," he told them. "Let the blood lie on them that condemn. . . ."

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the fever abated. The low character and gross misdeeds of "Doctor Oates" and his accessories were finally exposed. When Shaftesbury threatened the King with further attempts at undermining the government, Charles warned him

he had gone too far: "My Lord, let there be no self-delusion. I will never yield and will not let myself be intimidated. Men ordinarily become more timid as they grow old; as for me, I shall be, on the contrary, bolder and firmer and I will not stain my life and reputation in the little time that perhaps remains for me to live. I do not fear the dangers and calamities which people try to frighten me with. I have the law and reason on my side."

And so he did. A public restored to calm, and a new Parliament, finally turned on the demagogues who had tried to exploit a national crisis as a means of gaining personal power and paying off old grudges. Oates was pilloried and Shaftesbury ended his life a disgraced exile. "Good King Charles' glorious days" are now remembered mainly for their comparative peace, stability and prosperity, and for the enormous English artistic and intellectual vitality of the period. The Popish Plot, on the other hand, is generally reckoned a nasty episode involving a small band of zealots and scoundrels on both sides and a large number of innocent victims—a sick joke that ran temporarily amok and then fizzled out.

One wonders.

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